

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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THE GREAT CONVERSATION

VOLUME 1 *GREAT BOOKS OF THE WESTERN WORLD*

Robert M. Hutchins

CHAPTER I

The Tradition of the West

THE tradition of the West is embodied in the Great Conversation that began in the dawn of history and that continues to the present day. Whatever the merits of other civilizations in other respects, no civilization is like that of the West in this respect. No other civilization can claim that its defining characteristic is a dialogue of this sort. No dialogue in any other civilization can compare with that of the West in the number of great works of the mind that have contributed to this dialogue. The goal toward which Western society moves is the Civilization of the Dialogue. The spirit of Western civilization is the spirit of inquiry. Its dominant element is the Logos. Nothing is to remain undiscussed. Everybody is to speak his mind. No proposition is to be left unexamined. The exchange of ideas is held to be the path to the realization of the potentialities of the race. At a time when the West is most often represented by its friends as the source of that technology for which the whole world yearns and by its enemies as the fountainhead of selfishness and greed, it is worth remarking that, though both elements can be found in the Great Conversation, the Western ideal is not one or the other strand in the Conversation, but the Conversation itself. It would be an exaggeration to say that Western civilization means these books. The exaggeration would lie in the omission of the plastic arts and music, which have quite as important a part in Western civilization as the great productions included in this set. But to the extent to which books can present the idea of a civilization, the idea of Western civilization is here presented.

These books are the means of understanding our society and ourselves. They contain the great ideas that dominate us without our knowing it. There is no comparable repository of our tradition.

To put an end to the spirit of inquiry that has characterized the West it is not necessary to burn the books. All we have to do is to leave them unread for a few generations. On the other hand, the revival of interest in these books from time to time throughout history has provided the West with new drive and creativeness. Great books have salvaged, preserved, and transmitted the tradition on many occasions similar to our own.

The books contain not merely the tradition, but also the great exponents of the tradition. Their writings are models of the fine and liberal arts. They hold before us what Whitehead called "the habitual vision of greatness." These books have endured because men in every era have been lifted beyond themselves by the inspiration of

their example. Sir Richard Livingstone said: “We are tied down, all our days and for the greater part of our days, to the commonplace. That is where contact with great thinkers, great literature helps. In their company we are still in the ordinary world, but it is the ordinary world transfigured and seen through the eyes of wisdom and genius. And some of their vision becomes our own.”

Until very recently these books have been central in education in the West. They were the principal instrument of liberal education, the education that men acquired as an end in itself, for no other purpose than that it would help them to be men, to lead human lives, and better lives than they would otherwise be able to lead.

The aim of liberal education is human excellence, both private and public (for man is a political animal). Its object is the excellence of man as man and man as citizen. It regards man as an end, not as a means; and it regards the ends of life, and not the means to it. For this reason it is the education of free men. Other types of education or training treat men as means to some other end, or are at best concerned with the means of life, with earning a living, and not with its ends.

The substance of liberal education appears to consist in the recognition of basic problems, in knowledge of distinctions and interrelations in subject matter, and in the comprehension of ideas.

Liberal education seeks to clarify the basic problems and to understand the way in which one problem bears upon another. It strives for a grasp of the methods by which solutions can be reached and the formulation of standards for testing solutions proposed. The liberally educated man understands, for example, the relation between the problem of the immortality of the soul and the problem of the best form of government; he understands that the one problem cannot be solved by the same method as the other, and that the test that he will have to bring to bear upon solutions proposed differs from one problem to the other.

The liberally educated man understands, by understanding the distinctions and interrelations of the basic fields of subject matter, the differences and connections between poetry and history, science and philosophy, theoretical and practical science; he understands that the same methods cannot be applied in all these fields; he knows the methods appropriate to each.

The liberally educated man comprehends the ideas that are relevant to the basic problems and that operate in the basic fields of subject

matter. He knows what is meant by soul, state, God, beauty, and by the other terms that are basic to the discussion of fundamental issues. He has some notion of the insights that these ideas, singly or in combination, provide concerning human experience.

The liberally educated man has a mind that can operate well in all fields. He may be a specialist in one field. But he can understand anything important that is said in any field and can see and use the light that it sheds upon his own. The liberally educated man is at home in the world of ideas and in the world of practical affairs, too, because he understands the relation of the two. He may not be at home in the world of practical affairs in the sense of liking the life he finds about him; but he will be at home in that world in the sense that he understands it. He may even derive from his liberal education some conception of the difference between a bad world and a good one and some notion of the ways in which one might be turned into the other.

The method of liberal education is the liberal arts, and the result of liberal education is discipline in those arts. The liberal artist learns to read, write, speak, listen, understand, and think. He learns to reckon, measure, and manipulate matter, quantity, and motion in order to predict, produce, and exchange. As we live in the tradition, whether we know it or not, so we are all liberal artists, whether we know it or not. We all practice the liberal arts, well or badly, all the time every day. As we should understand the tradition as well we can in order to understand ourselves, so we should be as good liberal artists as we can in order to become as fully human as we can.

The liberal arts are not merely indispensable; they are unavoidable. Nobody can decide for himself whether he is going to be a human being. The only question open to him is whether he will be an ignorant, undeveloped one or one who has sought to reach the highest point he is capable of attaining. The question, in short, is whether he will be a poor liberal artist or a good one.

The tradition of the West in education is the tradition of the liberal arts. Until very recently nobody took seriously the suggestion that there could be any other ideal. The educational ideas of John Locke, for example, which were directed to the preparation of the pupil to fit conveniently into the social and economic environment in which he found himself, made no impression on Locke's contemporaries. And so it will be found that other voices raised in criticism of liberal education fell upon deaf ears until about a half-century ago.

This Western devotion to the liberal arts and liberal education must have been largely responsible for the emergence of democracy as an ideal. The democratic ideal is equal opportunity for full human development, and, since the liberal arts are the basic means of such development, devotion to democracy naturally results from devotion to them. On the other hand, if acquisition of the liberal arts is an intrinsic part of human dignity, then the democratic ideal demands that we should strive to see to it that all have the opportunity to attain to the fullest measure of the liberal arts that is possible to each.

The present crisis in the world has been precipitated by the vision of the range of practical and productive art offered by the West. All over the world men are on the move, expressing their determination to share in the technology in which the West has excelled. This movement is one of the most spectacular in history, and everybody is agreed upon one thing about it: we do not know how to deal with it. It would be tragic if in our preoccupation with the crisis we failed to hold up as a thing of value for the world, even as that which might show us a way in which to deal with the crisis, our vision of the best that the West has to offer. That vision is the range of the liberal arts and liberal education. Our determination about the distribution of the fullest measure of these arts and this education will measure our loyalty to the best in our own past and our total service to the future of the world.

The great books were written by the greatest liberal artists. They exhibit the range of the liberal arts. The authors were also the greatest teachers. They taught one another. They taught all previous generations, up to a few years ago. The question is whether they can teach us. To this question we now turn.

CHAPTER II

Modern Times

UNTIL recently great books were central in liberal education; but liberal education was limited to an elite. So great books were limited to an elite and to those few of the submerged classes who succeeded in breaking into them in spite of the barriers that society threw up around them. Where anybody bothered to defend this exclusion, it was done on the basis that only those with exceptional intelligence and leisure could understand these books, and

that only those who had political power needed to understand them.

As the masses were admitted to political activity, it was assumed that, though they must be educated, they could not be educated in this way. They had to learn to read the newspaper and to write a business letter and to make change; but how could they be expected to study Plato or Dante or Newton? All that they needed to know about great writers could be translated for them in textbooks that did not suffer from the embarrassment of being either difficult or great.

The people now have political power and leisure. If they have not always used them wisely, it may be because they have not had the kind of education that would enable them to do so.

It is not argued that education through great books and the liberal arts was a poor education for the elite. It is argued that times have changed and that such an education would be a poor education for anybody today, since it is outmoded. It is remote from real life and today's problems. Many of the books were written when men held slaves. Many were written in a prescientific and preindustrial age. What can they have to say to us, free, democratic citizens of a scientific, industrial era?

This is a kind of sociological determinism. As economic determinism holds that all activity is guided and regulated by the conditions of production, so sociological determinism claims that intellectual activity, at least, is always relative to a particular society, so that, if the society changes in an important way, the activity becomes irrelevant. Ideas originating in one state of society can have no bearing on another state of society. If they seem to have a bearing, this is only seeming. Ideas are the rationalizations of the social conditions that exist at any given time. If we seek to use in our own time the ideas of another, we shall deceive ourselves, because by definition these ideas have no application to any other time than that which produced them.

History and common sense explode sociological determinism, and economic determinism, too. There is something called man on this earth. He wrestles with his problems and tries to solve them. These problems change from epoch to epoch in certain respects; they remain the same in others. What is the good life? What is a good state? Is there a God?

What is the nature and destiny of man? Such questions and a host of others persist because man persists, and they will persist as long

as he does. Through the ages great men have written down their discussion of these persistent questions. Are we to disdain the light they offer us on the ground that they lived in primitive, far-off times? As someone has remarked, "The Greeks could not broadcast the Aeschylean tragedy; but they could write it."

This set of books explodes sociological determinism, because it shows that no age speaks with a single voice. No society so determines intellectual activity that there can be no major intellectual disagreements in it. The conservative and the radical, the practical man and the theoretician, the idealist and the realist will be found in every society, many of them conducting the same kind of arguments that are carried on today. Although man has progressed in many spectacular respects, I suppose it will not be denied that he is today worse off in many respects, some of them more important than the respects in which he has improved. We should not reject the help of the sages of former times. We need all the help we can get.

The chief exponent of the view that times have changed and that our conception of the best education must change with them is that most misunderstood of all philosophers of education, John Dewey. It is one of the ironies of fate that his followers who have misunderstood him have carried all before them in American education; whereas the plans he proposed have never been tried. The notion that is perhaps most popular in the United States, that the object of education is to adjust the young to their environment, and in particular to teach them to make a living, John Dewey roundly condemned; yet it is usually advanced in his name.

Dewey was first of all a social reformer. He could not advocate adjustment to an environment the brutality and injustice of which repelled him. He believed in his own conception of liberal education for all and looked upon any kind of training directed to learning a trade, solely to make a living at it, as narrowing and illiberal. He would especially repudiate those who seek to differentiate among the young on the basis of their capacity in order to say that only some are capable of acquiring a liberal education, in Dewey's conception of it or any other.

John Dewey's central position is stated in his major book on education, *Democracy and Education*, published in 1916. He says: "Both practically and philosophically, the key to the present educational situation lies in a gradual reconstruction of school materials and methods so as to utilize various forms of occupation typifying social callings, and to bring out their intellectual and moral con-

tent/’ The occupations that are to be engaged in are those “which are indicated by the needs and interests of the pupil at the time. Only in this way can there be on the part of the educator and of the one educated a genuine discovery of personal aptitudes so that the proper choice of a specialized pursuit in later life may be indicated. Moreover, the discovery of capacity and aptitude will be a constant progress as long as growth continues.

Dewey’s chief reason for this recommendation is found in his psychology of learning. “An occupation is a continuous activity having a purpose. Education through occupations consequently combines within itself more of the factors conducive to learning than any other method. It calls instincts and habits into play; it is a foe to passive receptivity. It has an end in view; results are to be accomplished. Hence it appeals to thought; it demands that an idea of an end be steadily maintained, so that activity must be progressive, leading from one stage to another; observation and ingenuity are required at each stage to overcome obstacles and to discover and readjust means of execution. In short, an occupation, pursued under conditions where the realization of the activity rather than merely the external product is the aim, fulfills the requirements which were laid down earlier in connection with the discussion of aims, interest, and thinking.”

The doctrine is that occupations, means of earning a living, should constitute the object of the attention of the educational system. This is not for the purpose of teaching the pupils how to make a living. Dewey opposes pure vocational training and urges that “a truly liberal, and liberating, education would refuse today to isolate vocational training on any of its levels from a continuous education in the social, moral and scientific contexts within which wisely administered callings and professions must function.” He proposes education through occupations as a means of arousing interest, which it is assumed can be aroused by the study of occupations, of helping students to select a vocation, and of showing them the significance of the various ways of earning a living.

This is not the place for an elaborate critique of this doctrine. It is perhaps enough to say that the misinterpretations and misapplications of it were natural and inevitable. A program of social reform cannot be achieved through the educational system unless it is one that the society is prepared to accept. The educational system is the society’s attempt to perpetuate itself and its own ideals. If a society wishes to improve, it will use the educational system for that purpose. Even in this case it will not allow the educational system to determine for itself what improvement is, unless it is a society that

believes that the free and independent exercise of individual judgment is the best way to achieve improvement. If a society does not wish to change, it cannot be reformed through the educational system. In practice, a program of social reform will turn out to be what Dewey 's has turned out to be in the hands of his followers, a program of social adjustment.

So a program of education through occupations will in practice turn out to be a program of education for occupations. Indeed, Dewey never tells us how it can be anything else. He does not say how he would accomplish the study of the moral, social, scientific, and intellectual contexts of occupations without resorting to those great books and those liberal arts which he regards as outmoded by experimental science and industrialization.

Nor does he indicate any awareness of the practical difficulties of having occupations studied at school. The school cannot duplicate the actual conditions of industry, commerce, finance, and the learned professions. Machines, methods, teachers can never be up to date. The conditions in the educational system generally can never be those that obtain in the modern medical school, in which the atmosphere of reality does not have to be created, because it is already there: the patient is really sick; the professor is trying to cure him; and the student learns to be a doctor by acting as the professor's assistant.

Dewey is certainly correct in saying that the actual conditions of practice teach by arousing interest and defining the aim. But he fails to notice that this leads not to the study of occupations in the educational system, but to the study of occupations through apprenticeship. This is the situation in the medical school. The apprentice is committed to the occupation and learns it under the actual conditions of practice. In the educational system generally the actual conditions of practice cannot be successfully imitated; and the pupil is not committed to the occupation.

Since the pupil is not committed to the occupation, the proposition that the occupations that are to be studied are those which are indicated by the needs and interests of the pupil at the time is alarming. Between the ages of six and fourteen I wanted, in rapid succession, to be an iceman (a now extinct occupation), a "motorman" on the horse cars (also extinct), a fireman, a postman, a policeman, a professional baseball player, and a missionary. The notion that what my teachers should have done was to offer me a study of these occupations as the fancy for each of them took me is so startling that Mr. Dewey's followers may perhaps be excused for refusing to

take him literally and contenting themselves with trade-school instruction looking toward earning a living.

The educational results of studies of occupations as the passing whims of children suggested them would hardly be what Mr. Dewey hoped, even if such a curriculum could in fact be instituted, as it never has been. One educational proposition I take to be axiomatic, that matters that demand experience of those who seek to understand them cannot be understood by those who are without experience. A child can and should learn about the economic and political system by way of introduction to it, but he cannot understand it, in the same way or to the same degree that he can understand arithmetic, music, and science. Nor can he understand the moral and social contents of occupations in which he has never engaged under the actual conditions of practice.

As the quotations I have given show, Mr. Dewey wants to concentrate on the study of occupations because he thinks that they will arouse real interest and lead to real learning. But the interest of the young in occupations is neither intense nor permanent, except in the case of an individual with a very special, overwhelming bent, until the time is almost at hand at which they have to make up their minds about the choice of their careers. Even then they can learn little about them until they have engaged in them, as the apprentice does, under the conditions under which they are carried on in the world. They cannot understand them; least of all can they understand their social and economic and political contexts, until they have had some experience as wage earners and citizens. I say again that imitation experiences in the classroom are not a substitute for actual experiences in life. Such experiences can lead only to illusion : they lead the pupil to think he understands something when he does not.

From the looks of things, all young Americans of a certain age now want to be cowboys. I doubt whether it would be useful for the schools to concentrate on cowpunching in its moral, social, political, scientific, and intellectual contexts. I do not see how the schools could do it, except by apprenticing the pupils to cowmen. I doubt whether, in the absence of such apprenticeship, much real learning would result. I doubt that, if it were possible to arouse real interest in cowmanship and its various contexts and to train up a generation of accomplished cowboys through the educational system, it would be in the public interest to dedicate the educational system to this purpose.

The reason is, apart from those I have already mentioned, that to

regard the study of occupations as central in education assigns them a place to which they are not entitled. Work is for the sake of leisure. What will Mr. Dewey do about leisure? Will he ignore the end and concentrate on the means, so that, when the means have given us the end, we do not know what to do with ourselves? What about the duties of citizenship, which are more complicated and more important than at any time in history? Will the study of occupations, in all their contexts, help us to achieve that intellectual independence which democratic citizenship requires? Is it not a fact that we are now so wrapped up in our own occupations and the special interests of our own occupational groups that we are almost at the pretyrannical stage described by Vico, the stage where everybody is so concerned with his own special interests that nobody looks after the common good? Is not the study of occupations the way to hasten the disintegration of such community as still remains, through emphasizing our individuality at the expense of our common humanity?

Democracy and Education was written before the assembly line had achieved its dominant position in the industrial world and before mechanization had depopulated the farms of America. The signs of these processes were already at hand; and Dewey saw the necessity of facing the social problems they would raise. One of these is the humanization of work. His book is a noble, generous effort to solve this and other social problems through the educational system. Unfortunately, the methods he proposed would not solve these problems; they would merely destroy the educational system.

The humanization of work is one of the most baffling issues of our time. We cannot hope to get rid of work altogether. We cannot say that we have dealt adequately with work when we have urged the prolongation of leisure.

Whatever work there is should have as much meaning as possible. Wherever possible, workmen should be artists; their work should be the application of knowledge or science and known and enjoyed by them as such. They should, if possible, know what they are doing, why what they are doing has the results it has, why they are doing it, and what constitutes the goodness of the things produced. They should understand what happens to what they produce, why it happens in that way, and how to improve what happens. They should understand their relations to others co-operating in a given process, the relation of that process to other processes, the pattern of them all as constituting the economy of the nation, and the bearing of the economy on the social, moral, and political life of the

nation and the world. Work would be humanized if understanding of all these kinds were in it and around it.

To have these kinds of understanding the man who works must have a good mind. The purpose of education is to develop a good mind. Everybody should have equal access to the kind of education most likely to develop such a mind and should have it for as long as it takes to acquire enough intellectual excellence to fix once and for all the vision of the continuous need for more and more intellectual excellence.

This is the educational path to the humanization of work. The man who acquires some intellectual excellence and intends to go on acquiring more will, to borrow a phrase from Dewey, “reconstruct and reorganize his experience/” We need have few fears that he will not be able to learn how to make a living. In addition to performing this indispensable task, he will inquire critically about the kind of life he leads while making a living. He will seek to understand the manner in which the life of all is affected by the way he and his fellow workers are making a living. He will develop all the meaning there is in his work and go on to see to it that it has more and better meaning.

This set of books is offered not merely as an object upon which leisure may be expended, but also as a means to the humanization of work through understanding.

[We welcome your comments, questions, or suggestions.](#)

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