

## On the Future Possibility of Liberal Education

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### I

#### Introduction: What is Liberal Education?

Let me begin by reading a passage from John Stuart Mill's "On Liberty" which captures, as well as any important book that is somewhat accessible to us, what liberal education can be thought to be.

If the cultivation of the understanding consists in one thing more than in another, it is surely in learning the grounds of one's own opinions. Whatever people believe, on subjects on which it is of the first importance to believe rightly, they ought to be able to defend against at least the common objections. . . .

On every subject on which difference of opinions is possible, the truth depends on a balance to be struck between two sets of conflicting reasons. Even in natural philosophy, there is always some other explanation possible of the same facts; geocentric theory instead of heliocentric, phlogiston instead of oxygen; and it has to be shown why that other theory cannot be the true one; and until this is shown, and until we know how it is shown, we do not understand the grounds of our opinion. But when we turn to subjects infinitely more complicated, to morals, religion, politics, social relations, and the business of life, three-fourths of the arguments for every disputed opinion consist in dispelling the appearances which favor some opinion different from it. The greatest orator, save one, of antiquity, has left it on record that he always studied his adversary's case with as great, if not with still greater, intensity than even his own. What Cicero practiced as the means of forensic success requires to be imitated by all who study any subject in order to arrive at the truth. He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side, if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion. The rational position for him would be suspension of judgment, and unless he contents himself with that, he is either led by authority or adopts, like the generality of the world, the side to which he feels most inclination." . . . feels most inclination." <sup>1</sup>

It is striking, for Mill, that liberty of thought is primarily not about being free from either *political* or *social* restraints but about being free from *our own* limitations, *our own* narrowness and *our own* lack of awareness of alternative understandings of, and alternative answers to, important human questions. In this respect, Mill retains what the oldest sources suggest, namely that "liberal" in liberal education was understood in contrast to "enslaved." And enslaved, with reference to education, referred not primarily to a *legal* but to an *intellectual* and *moral* condition.

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<sup>1</sup>Elizabeth Rapaport ed., On Liberty (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), Ch.II "On the Liberty of Thought and Discussion," pp. 34-35.

The thought was that one could well be *legally* free and yet *intellectually* and *morally* enslaved. And vice-versa. A free human being was thought to be one who is free both from uncontrollable passions (either one's own or others) and from mere habitual or unthinking acceptance of the ideas (either of oneself or others). To be a free person in this sense was to know the grounds of both his own opinions and of those who disagree with those opinions. Hence, an education to these ends was one which taught skill in *articulating* one's own convictions and in *listening* to the opinions of others. In place then of merely habitual acceptance of the ideas (of one's family, class, country, etc.) would emerge reasoned conviction informed by awareness of at least some plausible alternatives.

A free person in this sense was characterized by thoughtfulness rather than dogmatism; yet he had convictions about how things are and ought to be that did not change with every breeze of fashion. That is what it meant to have "convictions". Convictions did not mean, for example, what we now mean when we say "I feel strongly". Convictions were articulate reasons, not strong feelings, though they might be accompanied by strong feelings; and those articulate reasons endured. Preferably for centuries but at least longer than today's newspaper. Liberal education is suspicious of fashion and hence suffers in an environment, such as the present, in which fashion tends to drive what teaching is "relevant", what learning "meets social needs" and what research is funded. There was about such a liberally educated person an air of *seriousness of attitude*, of *solidity of opinion*, and of *sobriety of speech*. What he thought about a topic would not come as a complete surprise to those who knew him because it issued from principles or convictions that were rooted in his overall outlook or world-view.

The oldest aim of liberal education was the cultivation of liberally educated human beings in something like the foregoing sense. But the formation of what about them exactly? Well, of their thought, their speech, their principles, their judgment, and their instincts, especially about how we should live, and more especially about how we should live together. In a word, what the tradition of liberal education called their *souls*. This kind of education assumed therefore that human beings had souls, that these souls could be at least partly cultivated by education, and that questions such as "what is a healthy human soul" and "what kind of family, society, and political community best fosters them", were meaningful, important, and could be answered in better, as distinguished from worse, ways. And finally, it assumed that the study of these things was central to any "higher" form of education. The same Cicero whom Mill praises was the first person of record to speak of both the proper objects and modes of study of this "higher" education as "artes liberales"—the liberal arts.

It is not apparent to me that *any* of the foregoing assumptions have been accepted, for some time now, by those who form modern university curricula. Nor do I see any reason to expect that to change. The public philosophy of such institutions eschews these questions and marginalizes the cultivation of souls. I say that from my own direct experience, for I have taught at a large state university for 43 years. However, when I began teaching there, and for some years thereafter, the Undergraduate Catalog still contained the following affirmation of liberal education near the beginning of the General Education section. "A liberal education . . . is the education which gives a man a clear, conscious view of his own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them." This quotation was then followed by this statement in the name of the university. "The General Education section of a student's undergraduate program is especially designed to contribute to liberal education as defined above

by John Henry Newman.<sup>2</sup>

Admittedly, Newman's view of liberal education as quoted captures only part of what Mill and Cicero thought liberal education was. But Newman still points us towards their understanding. For it is difficult to see how can one *either know* well or *articulate* well our own "opinions", "judgments", and "truth" without knowing, by way of contrast, something about other opinions, judgments and truths which our own play off against.

## II Two Traditional Obstacles to Liberal Education

Two obstacles to liberal education have persisted over time.

1) First, is the love of ones own opinions whether or not one is able to defend them "against at least the common objections" as Mill says. I will not discuss this obstacle further than to observe the difficulty it presents. For while an attachment to ones own opinions *is* an obstacle to a serious liberal education in the form of "close mindedness", liberal education also seems *to require an attachment to* ones own opinions. Such attachment, a love of ones own, makes liberal education relevant to the student. It is my experience that students who come with no preconceived opinions or strongly held convictions, are poor candidates for either wanting or receiving a liberal education. *Empty vessels* can have knowledge poured into them, if knowledge is understood as mere facts and formulas. But *they cannot* be active appropriators of questions or of alternative answers to those questions. So an attachment to ones own inherited opinions and convictions is *both* an obstacle to and necessary to, liberal education. That's the difficulty.

2) The second persistent obstacle to liberal education is the view that higher education is for the sake of *utility* rather than for the sake of *soul formation* or *culture*. In 1948, Martin Luther King Jr. argued that "education has a two-fold function to perform in the life of man and in society: the one is utility and the other is culture." "[T]he goal of true education" is "intelligence plus character." "Intelligence is not enough". Utility is not enough. Efficiency in achieving our ends is not enough. "Education which stops with efficiency may prove the greatest menace to society if possessed by people who lack worthy objectives." A free human being, he argued, must learn "to sift and weigh evidence" in order to avoid "the morass of propaganda" to which "the press, the classroom, the platform and the pulpit" are prone. King suspects that higher education is perhaps too concerned with utility and not enough with culture.<sup>3</sup> This suspicion may not apply to Shimer college but it is my experience is that it dominates much of what we call "higher education."

What King noticed about the mid-20th century tendency to downplay "culture" in education was noticed long before him by Tocqueville who ascribed to democracy itself American's illiberal ideas of what knowledge is worth acquiring.

"The higher parts of all sciences require meditation above everything else. But nothing is less conducive to meditation that the setup of democratic society. . . . everyone is on the move, some in quest of power, others of

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<sup>2</sup>NIU Undergraduate Catalog, 1972-73, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup>"The Purpose of Education", Morehouse College, 1948.

gain. In the midst of this universal tumult, this incessant conflict of jarring interests, this endless chase for wealth, where is one to find the calm for profound researches of the intellect? . . . Democratic social conditions and institutions involve most people in continual activity, but habits of thought useful in action are not always helpful to thought. The man of action often has to make do with approximations, for he would never accomplish his purpose if he wanted to make every detail perfect. He must always be acting on the basis of ideas which he has not had time to plumb deeply, for the seasonableness of an idea is much more often useful to him than its strict accuracy. Moreover, by and large it is less risky for him to rely on some false principles than to waste his time establishing the truth of them all. It is not long and learned demonstrations which keep the world going. A quick glance at a particular fact, the daily study of the changing passions of the crowd, the chance of the moment, and skill to grasp it; such things decide all its affairs.

In democratic centuries, when almost everyone is engaged in active life, the darting speed of a quick, superficial mind is at a premium, while slow, deep thought is excessively undervalued. . . .

It is clear that in democracies individual interest and those of the state demand that education for most people should be scientific, commercial, and industrial rather than literary."<sup>4</sup>

From King and Tocqueville one might begin to wonder whether freedom of the mind, culture and a healthy soul are not threatened by the democratic way of life. That question, at least, would be an important object of study in any college where liberal education mattered.

### III

#### Three New Obstacles To Liberal Education in the Future

However that might be, we cannot assume that the old obstacles to liberal education will go away or be mitigated. Moreover, some new ones seem to be emerging.

1) The supremacy of economics in the sense that the most important thing most people desire most of the time is sufficient economic abundance for comfortable self-preservation. Human life so understood tends to produce human beings with little inclination or leisure for the distinctly human activity of thinking about permanent questions or enduring issues of how they should live.

Some of you may recognize this from a famous book you might have read, and which I presume is even taught at Shimer, which envisages future human beings as having been reduced to herbivores contentedly chewing their cuds. Those who may not have read this book might still ask yourself whether you do not increasingly see these sort of people sitting in your classes. For myself, I can say that when I ask students what they hope to get from a college education at my university, what they tell me is getting a job, having fun, and meeting different kinds of people.

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<sup>4</sup>J. P. Mayer, ed., Democracy in America (New York: Harper, 1969), p. 460-461, 476.

This may not exactly be “grazing herbivore” behavior but it is akin to it.

2) The second new obstacle is the increasing desire for universal recognition. "I'm as good as anybody else" or "who are you to judge my behavior as good or bad" seems to be a particular version of democratic equality; and the longing which it implies apparently can be satisfied only, or best, within liberal democracy.

From an older point of view, this view that everyone was as good as everyone else would have been regarded as unintelligent because it was formerly assumed that people *should* be judged as better or worse by "the content of their character." In using this quote, of course, I intend to call to mind Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington, 46 years ago. In that speech, King hoped that "my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." But this older point of view has been undermined by the various egalitarian relativisms which have become influential within liberal democracy since 1963. I include in these relativisms, the "dogmatism based on relativism" which seems pervasive at the state university where I teach, both among faculty and among students.

Understanding democratic equality in light of the equal goodness of all the selves, and/or of their ways of life, both supports the coming into being of a universal state or society from which all judgmental differences have disappeared, or been suppressed, and also makes independent thought less possible. The reason for the latter is that thought about what it means to be a good, a free, a just human being implies the possibility that there might be a truth about these things, as well as a truth about their opposites. Not truth “for me” or truth “for you” but truth which is valid for all of us and even valid everywhere and always. But if we know in advance that there is no such truth; or if there is such truth, it can have no public standing, then what reason is there to go to all the trouble and bother of thinking about them? How can these great questions of how we can best live, the study of which has constituted the subject matter and focus of liberal education since Cicero, still be taken seriously in a context which assumes reason is powerless to answer them?

3) A third new obstacle to liberal education in the future is the long term decline in the teaching of ideas in our universities, especially what in John Flower, former President of Cleveland State University, call the “mass market state universities and community colleges.” I quote from an article he wrote for the Chronicle of Higher Education in 2003.

The millions of first-generation undergraduates now in mass-market institutions, like regional state universities and community colleges, have had little to no exposure to the power of thought within the liberal arts. They have no great interest in the life of the mind. The lack of experience on the part of these students in how to handle ideas -- as contrasted to the immediate, hedonistic response of their senses -- is both a national disgrace and a disaster. . . . These students desperately need the influence of the proven great thinkers of the past. They are not getting it.<sup>5</sup>

In my experience, this decline in teaching about ideas in universities and colleges, seems to be both driven by, and intensifies, the decline in conversational skills among the young with which they come to college. Students who do not come to school having already learned how to

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<sup>5</sup>November 21, 2003.

listen to the reasons for opinions given around the home dinner table, and how to respond to those reasons with reasons of their own, lack the basic ability to appropriate a liberal education. No ideas, no liberal education. As a result their teachers in high school and college retreat to teaching them information or facts which they can master by memorizing without any need to understand.

Despite these 3 new obstacles, I think the possibility of Liberal Education in the future will in some ways be what it has always been. A matter of suitably inclined students becoming somehow aware of, and gravitating to, teachers who make this kind of education available. It is doubtful that in the future there will be any greater institutional encouragement, support, or even recognition of this activity than heretofore. In principle it could be done institutionally through suitably constructed University Honors program. But such things cost money and, under foreseeable circumstances, the expenditure would have little "utility" as the world, as employers, as Boards of Trustees, or as state legislatures understand "utility." Increasingly it even lacks utility as university administrators understand utility and that may also be (I am uncertain) a new obstacle to it which did not formerly exist.

Here is what I mean. In the 43 years I have taught at my state university, state legislatures have increasingly come to view public higher education as a "private good" rather than a "public good." That is, higher education has come to be thought to be primarily for the good of individuals to help them get better jobs and for employers to have trained employees. The old idea that an educated citizenry made for a better society, better government, and better communities has silently ceased to be much discussed or acted upon by policy makers. That is what I mean by higher education now being thought of less as a "public good." And since it is now mostly only understood to be good primarily for private interests and not for the common good, public financial support for higher education has declined both steadily and dramatically. When I began university teaching in 1966, I was told that the State provided 72% of the university's operating budget. In 2003, the university President was quoted in the student newspaper as saying that in the 1980's, when the university last reached its 2003 enrollment, it was 50%. But in 2003 it was down to 30%.

This is, of course, also a national trend. And it has left the institutional fate of liberal education to educational administrators who have harder and hard times paying the bills. Liberal education is more expensive than education done on the factory model. The latter can make do with large classes and multiple choice tests and therefore has greater "economies of scale", as we like to describe the conditions which drive Liberal Education out of higher education. So those who have to pay the bills, prefer to fill faculty slots with those who can teach subjects in ways that accommodate larger and larger classes. The credit hours all look the same and factory produced credit hours are cheaper. Moreover, there are few overhead-paying grants for those who do liberal education and therefore such education has little value in that way to Deans who want to become Provosts, Provosts who want to become Presidents, or President's who want to please their governing boards and legislatures by their efficiency in producing credit hours.

There might still be a way for liberal education to justify itself to those who pay the bills as a "public good." This would require advocates of liberal education to figure out how liberal education could serve to educate better citizens. My touchstone for how this could be done is a statement from Horace Mann, known as the "Father of the Common Schools" because he led in establishing elementary public schools in the United States. He also was the first Secretary of the Massachusetts State Board of Education (1836); founded the first State Normal School in the U.S.

to improve the quality of educating public school teachers (1839); became a Congressman from Massachusetts as an anti-slavery Whig (1848); and in 1853 became President of Antioch College in Ohio. As you listen to his idea of what educating citizens could be see how much it overlaps with what you understand as liberal education.

If the majority of a self governing people are sober-minded, enlightened, studious of right, capable of comparing and balancing opposite interpretations of a fundamental law, or opposite views of a particular system of policy; then all appeals addressed to them in messages, speeches, pamphlets and from the thousand-tongued newspaper press, will be calm, dispassionate, adapted at once to elucidate the subject under consideration and to instruct and elevate the mind of the arbitors. But, on the other hand, if the people are ignorant, fickle, averse to or incapable of, patient inquiry, prone to hasty decisions from plausible appearances, or reckless from prejudice or passion, then the demagogues who address, will adapt themselves to the dupes who hear, just as certainly as the hunter adapts his lure to the animal he would ensnare; and flattery, imposture, falsehood, the vindication and eulogy of fellow partisans however wicked, and the defamation of opponents however virtuous, will be the instruments by which a warfare, destructive in the end alike to victors and vanquished, will be waged. Let the spirit and tone of our congressional and legislative speech-makers and the language of the political press throughout the country, decide the question, which of the above described classes they consider themselves as addressing . . .<sup>6</sup>

Do you see what I mean? Ask yourself this question. Would our public political disputes have reached its current low ebb of civility, nasty partisanship, and disregard for truth, if Horace Mann's conception had prevailed of education as a public good understood as educating students to this way of thinking, understanding, and judging, public men and their public policy proposals? And this way of thinking differ in any important way from what liberal education has sought from Cicero, to Mill, to Newman?

#### **IV Conclusion**

We are a liberal democratic political system and a corporate-business oriented economic system and neither, as far as I can tell, has much use for liberally educated human beings. Those schooled in the best formulations of, and alternative answers to, enduring questions of human well-being, tend to be sand in the gears of smoothly functioning machines, whether political or business. They are this because such people think beyond the next election and beyond the bottom line. They know how to, and do, distinguish sound argument from plausible appearances and especially, most especially, they distinguish political slogans from political wisdom. And they raise untimely questions about right and wrong which frequently go against the grain of getting elected and of making a profit.

In politics, liberally educated people seek to understand where a new proposed policy (say some kind of government paid for health care), or a new interpretation of a fundamental law (say

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<sup>6</sup>“Go Forth and Teach”, Boston, July 4, 1842.

constitutional equality understood as justifying rather than prohibiting racial preferences) would take us in a future they may not live to see but about which they nevertheless care. And they tend to think that *permanent structures*, such as constitutional forms and due process of settled law, are more important than immediate policy victories. Accordingly, they are reluctant to undermine the permanent structures for the sake of the transitory policy victory, however immediately attractive the latter might be. And they would sacrifice this reluctance only in the gravest cases, which no human prudence can foresee; and, if it could foresee, would forbear to mention, lest by doing so it might encourage the unscrupulous to attempt the unthinkable.

The liberally educated also tend to be suspicious of *innovations in language* because they are aware of the truth in Humpty Dumpty's statement to Alice, that those who have the power to impose their new meaning of words on others, thereby rule them duplicitously, i.e. without their consent. But they also will be aware that sometimes language needs to change to take account of changed reality; and they will do what they can to respect the *humanness* of the ruled by trying to rationally persuade them about why the change is necessary. This of course presupposes an educated public-- one might even say a liberally educated public-- capable of *listening to, receiving and judging* such attempts at persuasion.

I would say that this last is among the most important contributions that Liberal Education has always tried to make by way of forming the souls of free human beings. By remembering how important words have changed their meaning over time, it frees thoughtful people in the present from accepting thoughtlessly the presently prevailing meaning of those words. And why is this good? Because such thoughtless acceptance means being enslaved to the present, to the here and now, to the "current" and therefore running and heedless mainstream. To be aware that the presently prevailing meanings did not always prevail is a pre-condition for asking oneself such liberating questions as: Is the present meaning the best meaning in principle? Is it even the best meaning here and now? And are the proposals for changing the meaning of words, better or worse than what now prevails?

There seems little grounds for thinking that the future possibility of liberal education, so understood, is likely to be any better than it has been in the past. At most universities and colleges, it appears that it will continue to be an institutionally marginal activity, a matter of bare possibility, almost pure chance. This is because it will continue to depend on students who have the capacity to think, and who love to think; and who are driven by a desire to seek to understand how human beings can best live together, by comparing available alternatives presented in some books that our civilization has passed down to us as having stood the test of time, and thereby having shown that they address enduring questions and enduring plausible answers; and it will also continue to depend on such students somehow finding their way to the vanishingly few teachers who have studied *these matters* from *such books*, and who have some skill at helping make those books *accessible* to those students. It will continue, that is, to be a rare and therefore a precious as well as a difficult thing to acquire.

But, as I sometimes ask my students who complain about how difficult this kind of education is, "So how much effort is it worth to be free"?