The Aim of Liberal Education

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I. THE CRISIS OF LIBERAL EDUCATION AND A PREREQUISITE FOR ITS RESOLUTION

Somewhat concealed by the more obvious problems of our time are indications that the liberal arts tradition is in serious trouble. Columbia University’s Jacques Barzun, for example, has warned that the liberal college now seems caught between the expansionist tendencies of the more sophisticated high schools and the pressure for specialization exerted by the affluent graduate schools. An editorial in the Saturday Review not long ago reported that the percentage of students enrolled in the small, private liberal colleges continues to decline year after year and predicted that perhaps one-third (roughly 200) of these colleges will not survive.

This situation is particularly disturbing in view of what has prevailed during much of the history of American education. In these earlier times liberal (or general) education was respected as the ideal form of education, a necessity for intellectual achievement, leadership, and culture.

A prerequisite to any evaluation or resolution of this crisis is a recognition of the distinctive character of a liberal education. Dr. Earl J. McGrath, a former U.S. Commissioner for Education, has repeatedly emphasized this need in arguing that many of the liberal colleges today have “lost their sense of special purpose.” ¹ The argument that follows is an attempt to precisely and persuasively define this special purpose. If successful, the argument will both refurbish a

¹Earl J. McGrath, The Graduate School and the Decline of Liberal Education (New York: Columbia University, 1959, p. 5.)
frequently forgotten ideal and demonstrate why liberal education is a cause which imposes on us a preemptive obligation.

II. THE FAILURE OF CURRENT DEFINITIONS

Among the colleges which now claim to provide a liberal education, many do not make a conscientious effort to define their educational ideal. Typically a line or two dealing with the aim of the college is inserted in the bulletins distributed to prospective students and parents and usually at least a paragraph is included with poetical embellishments in the promotional and accreditational propaganda. Frequently, however, these statements are unabashed window dressing. They give the impression of lofty purposes, thereby appealing to idealistic students, parents, and foundations. But their lack of rigor is betrayed by the glossy vagueness of the terms, the lack of internal consistency, and the fact that they are ignored in educational decision-making.

Among the colleges which claim to provide a liberal education and which make a conscientious effort to define their aim, the result is generally limited to two equally sterile alternatives. In some cases a definite but dogmatic formula is devised. Typically this is an attempt to define the ideal by listing a number of character traits which supposedly identify the liberally educated man. While the precision of this procedure is commendable, it is nonetheless open to criticism as being dogmatic inasmuch as the traits enumerated depend upon the preferences and prejudices of the group making the selection. In other cases a less dogmatic but more amorphous formula is furnished. Usually but unfortunately this attempt avoids criticism only by retreating to bland generalities. While the undogmatic intent of this procedure is admirable, it nonetheless fails as a definition because of its ambiguity.

These two alternatives have familiar illustrations. Sometimes the aim of liberal education is held to be the transmission of a certain body of knowledge which all educated men are educated to possess. This ideal of "common knowledge" is vulnerable to criticism, however, because men have been unable to agree for long on what constitutes "common knowledge"; and, if what constitutes it is taken on the authority of an individual or a faculty, then there is clearly no protection from the bias of that individual or faculty.

Often the ideal of "good citizenship" is adopted as a remedy for

2This ideal is present in some of the "Great Books" programs.

3Perhaps the best known statement of this ideal is the Harvard "Redbook": General Education in a Free Society: Report of the Harvard Committee (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1945). While the committee cogently rejects various unacceptable ideals, it stops short of a "unifying purpose" which is undogmatic. Turning to "the character of American society" in order to satisfy the educational search for unity, it takes the needs of the democratic state as its basic frame of reference. As much as we may be personally committed to democracy, to make liberal education subordinate to this political ideal is to bind it dogmatically.
the reputed "narrow intellectualism" of the ideal of "common knowledge." The recurring popularity of this ideal is evidenced by the presently widespread opinion that the college should avoid isolation and should put its resources at the service of the local and national communities and that its primary task is to train students to fulfill the responsibilities of an adult life within these communities. However, since the definition of "good citizenship" depends upon the definition of the good state and the good man, and since there is scarcely unanimity on these fundamentals, the imposition of this ideal results in an education that produces only apologists for the reigning ideology. The ideal of "good citizenship" is therefore objectionably dogmatic because it has the effect of committing education to the political ideals of a particular party or society.

Sometimes other ideals are preferred because "common knowledge" and "good citizenship" are thought to lack an essential spiritual or cultural emphasis. For example, the ideal of religious faith, though relatively out of favor today, has frequently been held in high esteem in the past, as is evidenced by the original close relationship in this country between the liberal college and denominational religion. Once again, nevertheless, this concept is objectionable as being dogmatic for the obvious reason that there is no universally accepted religious faith.

When each of the above ideals is criticized, dogmatism is avoided by sacrificing precision. For instance, occasionally it has been argued that the aim of liberal education is "the development of the intellect."4 This ideal seems less pretentious than the ideal of "common knowledge" because it does not make any judgment about what every liberally educated man should know. But the price of this modesty is that what once was a definite formula tends now to become an empty slogan. Attempts to specify the character of the "developed intellect" seem only to reinstate the original dogmatism.

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4A commendable attempt to specify this kind of ideal is made by P. L. Dressel and L. B. Mayhew in General Education: Explorations in Evaluation; The Final Report of the Cooperative Study of Evaluation in General Education of the American Council on Education (Washington: American Council on Education, 1954). In proposing that "critical thinking" is the "integrating concept" for liberal education, and in thus avoiding a political bias, the Dressel Report advances beyond the Harvard "Redbook." The authors, however, do not specify the meaning of "critical thinking" because they hold that this is still a matter for psychological research. It is this suggestion (that perhaps psychological investigations may be able to reveal the characteristics of "critical thinking") that faults an otherwise sound argument. To put the objection briefly, the determination of the nature of "critical thinking" is a normative, not an empirical matter. Hence psychology is not qualified to make this determination.
The ideal of "excellence"\textsuperscript{5} seems for some to escape the objectionable bias of the ideal of "good citizenship." With this modification it no longer appears mandatory to describe the character of the good citizen or to accept a particular set of obligations as the moral law. Again, however, the avoidance of dogmatism is achieved by retreating from specificity. Hopefully "excellence" will characterize any enterprise; consequently without further specification it is a bare superlative, unable to designate a form of education that is in any way distinctive.

The ideal of "morale"\textsuperscript{6} has recently been proposed as a replacement for the ideal of a denominational religious faith. As a result, a declaration of belief in any particular religious creed is avoided. But if the term "morale" is to descend from an ecumenical abstraction into the world of concrete discourse, it must be given precision. Yet once again it seems that any increase in precision will inevitably result in the intensification of an objectionable bias.

The task of devising a definition that is both specific and undogmatic is admittedly as difficult as it is desirable. Unless there is specificity, no significant definition has been achieved; and, unless there is freedom from dogma, the form of education defined will not, strictly speaking, be education at all, but mere training, propagandizing, or indoctrination.

\textbf{III. THE AIM DEFINED FREE OF DOGMA}

Obviously the expression "liberal education" has had a bewildering variety of uses. For some it is the name of an institution that is in conspiracy with "liberal" politicians to brainwash the young with radical and un-American ideas. At the other extreme, and no less prevalent and pernicious, is the view that it refers to an impractical, dilettantish diddling with precepts and concepts characteristic of aristocratic, reactionary civilizations. However, if my argument up to this point is acceptable, it is because we are tacitly agreed that there is a privileged use of the expression "liberal education" which refers to an education that is free from commitment to any dogma, prejudice, or mere opinion.

Nevertheless, we must now wonder whether it is at all possible to formulate a definition that is both unambiguous and undogmatic. Apparently any definition will reflect some particular ideology or set of values. Moreover, there appears today to be no single set of values to which all men can subscribe. It is in fact characteristically modern


to admit that all truths are relative to points of view, all obligations are relative to societies, and all tastes are relative to the fashions of the moment. In our pluralistic, skeptical age, consequently, it may seem anachronistic and naive to hope for an ideal of education that is both meaningful and more than the partisan of a particular ideology.

There is, however, a fatal inconsistency in any radical skepticism. A skepticism must be discriminating. It cannot imply that all conclusions are mere dogmas or prejudices. On the contrary, if skepticism itself is a justifiable conclusion, then it must at least have confidence in that process which entitles it to be a justifiable conclusion. This process—sometimes called criticism or dialectic—is a presupposition of even the most nihilistic skepticism.

As the presupposition of skepticism, criticism is the logical process of justifying conclusions. Its ideal is the justification of all conclusions, whether these be factual claims made against truth or value claims made against our obligations. The realization of this ideal would indeed be knowledge in the most unqualified sense. Infrequently men have not been embarrassed to seek such knowledge, and to speak of it as "wisdom." Unlike those ideals which merely express subjective preferences and prejudices, and which are defended only by ad hoc maneuvers, an ideal which is the presupposition of skepticism is affirmed even by all skeptical attempts to disaffirm it. As such, it has the unique characteristic which was found lacking in the most popular definitions of the aim of liberal education. An education which aims at wisdom, which seeks the justification of all conclusions, is liberal in the privileged sense that it is free from dogmatic commitment. Consequently, liberal education can be defined undogmatically as the pursuit of wisdom.

IV. THE AIM SPECIFIED

It remains to be demonstrated that the proposed definition can be given sufficient specificity to make it meaningful for educational theory and practice. This demonstration can only turn upon the fact that wisdom is knowledge in the most unqualified sense, and the fact that its essential feature is its freedom from dogma.

The dogmas that are the perennial obstacles to the pursuit of wisdom divide into two types according to whether they are theoretical, and pertain to the achievement of knowledge, or practical, and pertain to the application of knowledge. The first is an assumption which restricts knowledge to a given topic, model, or frame of reference. For instance, it has variously been assumed that the paradigm of knowledge is knowledge of the physical universe, or the moral law, or transcendent reality. Such knowledge is achieved on the basis of an assumption about the appropriate object of knowledge, however, and is, therefore, hypothetical or specialized, not comprehensive. Wisdom, in contrast, is comprehensive in the sense that it exempts no assumption from critical
examination. This insistence upon comprehensiveness does not support the absurd view that the wise man knows everything, nor the equally ridiculous view that he ignores facts in a flight to abstractions; it merely entails that no man knows anything as long as he is ignorant of those presuppositions which limit his own point of view and that true comprehension (as is suggested by etymology) requires comprehensiveness.

The second type of dogma and obstacle to the pursuit of wisdom is an imposed purpose, the demand that knowledge be useful for some preordained end. For example, it has variously been held that knowledge is essentially a means for individual self-fulfillment, or an instrument for social reform, or a path to religious enlightenment. Such knowledge, however, has been subordinated to a specific application and consequently is applied or technological, not pure. In contrast, wisdom is knowledge that is pure or "useless" in the sense that it is not sought as a means to any end. This emphasis upon purity gives no support to the weird view that the wise man disdains labor, nor to the equally silly notion that he spends his life just sitting and contemplating his navel; it merely recognizes that if knowledge is to be free from dogma, it must be an end (or ideal), not a means, that all activity is "sound and fury, signifying nothing" unless it is subordinated to an ideal, and that (contrary to the propaganda of tyranny) what is best cannot be what is useful.

Since wisdom is knowledge free from ungrounded assumptions and imposed purposes, liberal education, the pursuit of wisdom, must avoid specialization and technology and aspire to comprehensiveness and purity. As a result, it is unique among the enterprises of man because of its absolute independence: it cannot be justified by other endeavors, whereas all other endeavors require justification by it. It is, to adopt a contemporary idiom, the resolute concern for justified thought and action.7 Hopefully this concern will be engendered by the integrated educational program of the liberal college. If successful, it becomes an obsession which identifies a human being and which is the precondition for a meaningful life.

There is a recurrently popular epistemology that identifies knowledge with information. According to this theory, knowledge can be

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7There are different ways of summarizing this crucial point. For instance, for Plato it is "self-knowledge," while for Aristotle it is "wisdom." For Heidegger it is the existential point that "meditative thinking" makes possible "release toward things" and "openness to the mystery" (M. Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, New York: Harper and Row, 1966), while for R. S. Peters it is a linguistic point: "People . . . think that education must be for the sake of something extrinsic that is worthwhile, whereas the truth is that being worthwhile is part of what is meant by calling it 'education.' " (R. D. Archambault, ed., *Philosophical Analysis and Education*, New York: Humanities Press, 1965, p. 92.)
collected, processed, and preserved in books or punch cards in libraries or bomb-proof vaults. The problem of education then becomes the problem of efficiently transmitting these sacred nuggets to successive generations and the college is understood as an assembly line in which students are stuffed with the maximum amount of information in the minimum amount of time.

The definition of liberal education as the resolute concern for justified thought and action emphasizes the superficiality of any theory that identifies knowledge with information. If thought and action are to be justified, then obviously all conclusions, whether they be claims to truth or value, stand in need of justifications, or principles. In addition, conclusions require methods for their establishment and justification. Consequently, liberal education is not simply a concern for conclusions (the results of information provided by the various sciences), but it is necessarily also a concern for methods and principles. Conclusions are the contribution of the liberal sciences; methods are the affair of the liberal arts; and principles are the responsibility of philosophy.

V. THE FIRST DIMENSION: THE LIBERAL SCIENCES

A liberal education can only begin in medias res with the accepted conclusions of the liberal sciences. These sciences are those that are relatively comprehensive and pure.

The need for comprehensiveness implies that the sciences and conclusions that are more universal in scope be given priority over those that are more limited. The present tendency in liberal curricula to substitute specialized theoretical or applied sciences for a comprehensive treatment of science and the tendency to support this substitution on the ground that comprehensiveness is tantamount to superficiality can be defended solely on the basis of the theory which is self-defeating because it aspires to comprehensiveness while depreciating it. In particular, the exclusion of the practical sciences (ethics and politics) is not just theoretically arbitrary, but from the standpoint of liberal education scandalous. What is being excluded as irrelevant are the proposed answers to those fundamental questions about the good life and the good society which originally impel men to seek a liberal education. This bias against the practical sciences also degrades the poetical sciences. Its results can be seen in the not uncommon views that ethics is largely a matter of ministers and mores, and that aesthetics is mostly a diversion for intellectually oriented aesthetes. In addition, the preference for specialization over generalization within the theoretical sciences reverses the essential direction of the scientific enterprise, the movement from particularity to universality. The result of this prejudice against comprehensiveness is exemplified by the scientist whose achievements are compromised by his myopic inability to depart from
the methodological conventions of his own specialty, as well as by his
blindness to the ethical and aesthetical consequences of his work.

The need for purity requires that the sciences and conclusions which
are sought for their own sake be valued over those which are treated
as means to some end. The present tendency in liberal curricula to
emphasize the applied sciences, and to deprecate the pure sciences as
vestiges of an ivory-towerism which inhibits progress, can be defended
only on the basis of a theory which is self-defeating because it de­
precitates theory. In an education whose goal is wisdom it is imperative
that the application of knowledge always be secondary to the achieve­
ment of knowledge. In this situation the impediments to progress are
not the speculations of pure science but the glamour and gimmickry
of technology.

The proliferation of the specialized and applied sciences in the
liberal college is a symptom of the precarious condition of liberal edu­
cation. The college now rationalizes this proliferation in the name of
freedom by means of the so-called "elective principle." The syndrome
which is concealed by this euphemism for the loss of institutional
identity is recognized by an unstructured "cafeteria" curriculum which
levels-down all subjects to equal relevance (and irrelevance) by the
perpetual fragmentation of knowledge, by the curricular emphasis
upon the "interesting" and the "timely" rather than the demanding
and the timeless, by the increasing departmentalization and isolation
of the faculty, by the tendency to treat all students as "majors" and
to encourage premature research, by the teacher's embarrassment at
being a teacher (rather than a research scholar), and by the college's
embarrassment at being a college (rather than a university or grad­
uate school). What has been too frequently forgotten is the radical
disparity between liberal education and all other forms of education.
As Robert M. Hutchins has so forcefully reminded us, liberal educa­
tion, not specialization and technology, is the highest achievement of
both education and life. The liberal college is not a prep school for
graduate study; it has a more urgent, intrinsically valuable aim.

VI. THE SECOND DIMENSION: THE LIBERAL ARTS

The establishment and justification of the conclusions of liberal
sciences obviously require certain methods, disciplines, skills, or arts.
If the liberal sciences provide theoretical, practical, and poetical con­
cclusions, then the liberal arts are those methods required by the sci­
ciences for thinking, doing, and making. Consequently the generic liberal
arts are the arts of critical thinking, rational action, and aesthetic
creation and appreciation. Without these arts intelligence, character,
and culture are unrealizable, and wisdom remains an idea beyond
human aspiration.

The need for the liberal arts as a second dimension of liberal
education entails that those arts whose application is limited or subservient to personal or social ends be displaced in favor of the arts of critical thinking, rational action, and aesthetic creation and appreciation. In our liberal colleges today it is not unusual to find courses in various specialized and vocational or applied arts. But it is unusual to find curricula in which the acquisition of information is effectively complemented by a program of teaching and training designed to develop the arts of wisdom. Too often, for instance, there is little systematic concern with the diverse strategies and skills of scientific investigation; too often logic and mathematics are treated as options for those students who happen to be “analytically” inclined; and too frequently these same subjects are taught as specialized sciences and not as universal arts. The practical and poetical arts fare even worse than the theoretical arts. The arts of rational action, for instance, are generally regarded as personal or religious matters, and therefore beyond the legitimate scope of the curriculum. The only surviving vestige of the once-honored poetical arts to be considered essential in the curriculum is English composition. Rhetoric, once a member of the trivium, is now often viewed as trivial. The arts of literary interpretation and criticism, like those skills required for appreciation and creation in the fine arts, are typically tolerated as electives for those who happen to be “artistically” inclined. The result of this widespread neglect of the liberal arts is that the student, denied systematic training in these uniquely human skills, eventually seeks a surrogate outside the curriculum. There, in a jungle of largely anti-curricular “extra-curricular” activities, his energies are dissipated and the community is entertained, but his talents remain undisciplined and undeveloped.

The expression “liberal arts” has today degenerated to mean little more than a random collection of advanced high school studies, few of which are in any sense arts. Moreover, these studies are often not part and parcel of a comprehensive program of liberal education; they are sold piecemeal as unrelated courses and are normally remedial and preprofessional in their conception. The unfortunate and paradoxical truth is that, in spite of their name, our liberal arts colleges are no longer dedicated to the liberal arts.

VII. THE THIRD DIMENSION: PHILOSOPHY

The escape from dogma and the achievement of wisdom require that conclusions be justified by methods in principles. Liberal education, therefore, requires not only the liberal sciences and arts but also philosophy. As the concern with the ultimate justifications of thought and action, philosophy is neither a science nor an art, neither a body of information nor a repertory of methods. But while philosophy is distinct from both science and art, it is also inseparable from them.
Without them, it justifies nothing; and yet without it, nothing is justified. Philosophy is thus the indispensable third dimension of liberal education.

While the current crisis of liberal education can be attributed in part to the erosion of the comprehensiveness and purity of the sciences and in part to the neglect of the liberal arts, the crisis must also be attributed in part to the depreciation of philosophy. The present climate of educational opinion has largely collapsed the three dimensions of liberal education into a fragmented single dimension—to the collection of the conclusions of a few fashionable theoretical sciences and a few profitable applied sciences. In the frantic effort to engorge the student with this information, philosophy eventually becomes a superfluous curiosity. If it is forced to pose as a science, then, because its conclusions will be comic fare in competition with the conclusions of the genuine sciences, its fate is to be tolerated as a kind of museum for dead ideas. On the other hand, if it is forced to pose as an art, and is demoted to that motley, academic catch-all category, "the humanities," then it may gain a grudging acceptance as a kind of psychic or semantic therapy which is absorbing and beneficial for certain nervous cerebral types. The unfortunate and paradoxical truth is that, in spite of the etymology of its name, philosophy is seldom considered essential to liberal education.

VIII. THE IRONY IN THE PRESENT CRISIS

As strange as it may seem, the liberal college's current failure to maintain the comprehensiveness and purity of the sciences, its aversion to the liberal arts, and its depreciation of philosophy may conceivably be due in large part to an underlying fear of dogmatism. Colleges are typically reluctant to distinguish between sciences that are relevant and those that are irrelevant to the curriculum (on the ground that such structuring involves bias). They are suspicious of the arts (on the ground that arts require training, and training requires coercion). And they are distrustful of philosophy (on the ground that philosophy poses as a science but lacks scientific objectivity).

If it is indeed true that the fear of dogmatism is a decisive factor in the present crisis of liberal education, then the situation is tragically ironic. The concern with the liberal sciences, the liberal arts, and philosophy was originally required by the need to escape dogma. To replace this concern only with the accumulation of information is not to avoid dogmatism; it is, on the contrary, to engage in a more surreptitious and insidious form of dogmatism, one that remains hidden because it is a bias in the foundations of educational and epistemological theory. The escape from dogma and the approximation of wisdom demand the intense cultivation of each dimension of liberal education.
IX. THE PRE-EMPTIVE CLAIM OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

Certainly the argument presented here is nothing new. It has been stated many times and in many different ways since antiquity. Yet, because it is an argument that seeks both to inform us and to reform us, it requires repetition and reformulation. The aim of liberal education is (in a very specific sense) wisdom; and wisdom is a responsibility that must pre-empt all other responsibilities. If men lose this insight or abandon this cause, then all of the vaunted causes of our day are conceived in ignorance, presumptuous in their claim to obligation, and unworthy of passion.