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Chapter Twelve

The Place of Liberal Education in Higher Education

Marc D. Guerra

Every once in a while as I am guiding my students through what I think is an important passage in, say, one of Augustine's or Descartes' or Pascal's writings, I am reminded of something my favorite *Seinfeld* character says in one of my favorite episodes of *Seinfeld*. The episode is titled "The Little Jerry." In it Kramer buys a chicken in the hopes of being able to procure fresh eggs. When he finds out he actually bought a rooster, he trains the bird to cockfight. Huddled around a miniature gladiatorial arena at Little Jerry's first fight, Jerry and Elaine begin to discuss her balding boyfriend's recent marriage proposal. Jerry turns to Elaine and says, if you get married "your life is totally going to change." To which in a rare moment of genuine, if less than flattering, self-awareness, Elaine remarks, "Jerry, it is 3:30 in the morning, I am at a cockfight, what am I clinging to?" To be honest, at these moments I am probably not the only one in my classroom who feels like asking what am I clinging to? By the looks on some of my students' faces, I am pretty sure they feel like it is 3:30 in the morning and they have just inexplicably found themselves at a cockfight.

As a way of getting at the question "What are we clinging to?" when we ask students in contemporary colleges and universities to pore over such seemingly dated and impractical passages, let me begin by stating a rather elemental point: an education, by its very nature, is meant to affect a human being. An education is not meant to leave a person in the exact same state they were in before they were educated. The word education is derived from the Latin roots *e* (from or out of) and *duco* (I lead). Thus, at its etymological roots, education speaks of leading or directing a latent understanding out of someone. Education is not just something we undergo, something that hap-

pens to us. It is also something we actively partake of in the hope that our potential understanding of a thing will be actualized. These dual movements comport with commonsense understanding of education: we commonly think that education involves a teacher (one who leads or guides) and a student (one who is led or guided, one in whom something is drawn out of and formed).

Inasmuch as an education seeks to lead a human being to some desired end, it aims to be formative. To say that every education seeks to form a human being in light of some designated end or *telos* is to say that one can receive an education in many different things or many different ends. This point is sharpened—and made more problematic—when we think about *the* fundamental end of all of the various kinds of education. Here, the opening of Augustine's short work *On Christian Doctrine* is instructive. Like Plato's Socrates does in the first book of the *Republic*, Augustine begins this work by noting that ultimately education requires human beings to think about the question of how they should live. At its peak, human education is inextricably caught up with our desire to answer the question of what kind of human being do we really want to be.

Taking responsibility (or "ownership" to use the wince-inducing jargon of contemporary Education Schools) for this kind of education is a daunting task, both for students and for teachers. For it requires us to think courageously and seriously about a wide range of important—and by no means easy—historical, moral, political, philosophical, and theological questions. The sophistic alternatives to such education either set such weighty questions aside or dogmatically assume that these questions have already been definitively asked and answered. Such alternatives reduce all aspects of human education to forms of methodological training. In the name of expediency or ideological certainty, they all but ensure that we will remain enslaved to the particular prejudices of our particular caves. As Max Weber, the founder of modern sociology, made clear in his "Science as a Vocation" lecture nearly a century ago, if education is understood simply as the acquisition of a specific set of methodological skills, it fatalistically resigns itself to forming only "specialists without spirit or vision and voluptuaries without heart." Liberal education refuses to accept such radical lowering of the educational horizon. It understands that specialized forms of education, in the final analysis, must be tied to the overarching concerns of human beings' most fundamental education. It understands that to the extent that education is a kind of specialization, it must eventually specialize in the end and perfection of human beings.

The observation that one and the same person can gain an education in several different disciplines is reflected in the very life of our universities. Dizzying in size and outwardly impressive in operation, the modern university has multiple—and seemingly always multiplying—parts. In it we find

classes in astrophysics and apparel marketing, in English and entrepreneurship, in philosophy and paleontology. Nevertheless we still call it a *university*. The university speaks of a unity in which there is a manifested plurality. One place, devoted to one end, in which one can study many things. That we can study a variety of different things contributes to the problem we encounter when we first choose to pursue a college or university education. For such a choice requires us, usually at the tender age of 18, to make a judgment about something prior to having the requisite knowledge that would allow us to make a sound judgment. Before we have gained substantive knowledge about what we can study or what would be best for us to study, we are asked to decide where we will study, what major we will study, and with whom we will study. Even if we choose at this point to defer to the judgment of another, we are still choosing. We are simply choosing on the basis of trust and belief, not on the basis of substantive, internalized knowledge. We are choosing to believe that a particular person, perhaps our mother or father or brother or high school teacher or some statistics-crunching, prestige measuring 25-year-old at *US News* or *Barron's* or ISI who just wants to please their editor, is worthy of our trust. Because we are not the intellectually self-starting and self-determining minds that Descartes' depiction of the cogitating individual describes, we must choose. Not to do so, in some real way, would be inhuman.

What, then, defines an education as a liberal education? Today, the word liberal is viewed chiefly in a partisan context. We hear the term liberal and are apt to think that it refers to a person's partisan, political point of view—for example, he is liberal, he voted for President Obama, or, she is conservative, she voted for Governor Romney. It is not surprising that when hearing the words liberal and education said together a good number of students, faculty, administrators, parents, and MSNBC or Fox pundits wittingly or unwittingly mistakenly attribute a political or partisan goal to this kind of education. Another common mistake is to think that a liberal education means that one is intellectually and culturally, as the saying goes, well-rounded. In this view, liberal education is reduced to an education that introduces one to a smattering of different subjects and fields of study. Thus understood, the liberally educated is the intellectual equivalent of the jack-of-all-trades, who is also the master of none. He is the perfect dinner guest, capable of talking to a variety of "interesting people" about a variety of "interesting" subjects over a complexly bodied glass of pinot noir and an organically fed free-range hen.

The word liberal is derived from the Latin *liber*, meaning free. A liberal education accordingly speaks of the kind of education that befits a free person. What kind of person is not free? A slave is not free. Liberal education liberates one from slavery. It frees us from our inherited ignorance and acquired falsehoods. It lets us see instances of ignorance and falsehood for

what they truly are inasmuch as it allows us to discover and contemplate what is real, what truly exists, what Plato's Socrates periodically calls "the things that are." Such an education turns, in part, on the recognition that some things, the most important and highest things, are worth knowing for their own sake and other things are worth knowing for the sake of something else. Aristotle spoke of the distinction between theoretical knowledge, the type of knowledge that allows us to "behold" a thing, and practical knowledge, the type of knowledge that guides our activity as we attempt to do something in pursuit of a chosen end. Theoretical knowledge considers things that cannot be otherwise, things that are necessary, things that exist in the strong sense of the term. Practical knowledge, tethered to (but not exhausted by) knowledge of things we want or will, considers things that can be otherwise, things that can either be or not be, things that can be this way or that way. A liberal education should not only introduce us to the distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge, it should allow us to see that while it includes both kinds of knowledge (and thus is different from the Socratic philosopher's zetetic contemplation of "the whole"), it is more closely tied to knowledge of the things that are.

It goes without saying that it is extremely difficult to be free in the sense just described. To liberate oneself from long-held and often undetected opinions and prejudices is no mean task. The roots of such opinions and prejudices invariably run deep, and they are likely to be held by family and friends we hold dear. But we ought to remember that a liberal education need not divest us of each and every claim contained in our previously unexamined opinions and prejudices. Upon closer examination, some of these opinions may prove to be correct; some of these prejudices may prove to be accurate. A liberal education ought to allow us to separate right opinions from false ones; it ought to allow us also to recognize that many, if not most, of our opinions compound truths and falsehoods. Liberal education can help correct some of our less-than-sound opinions, even as it helps us move away from merely having an opinion about X to possessing genuine knowledge about X. Accordingly, liberal education rightly understood helps us to formulate sound judgments. It helps us to judge wisely, both in general and in an ongoing way, between those things that do and those things that do not contribute to the living of a genuinely human life.

At this point, let me say something which, I hope, has become obvious: a liberal education differs substantially from a political or civic education. Perhaps the best description of what a political or civic education is occurs at the beginning of the last book of Aristotle's *Politics*, the book in that work which deals, in an extended way, with education. Aristotle remarks that no one "will doubt that the legislator should direct his attention above all to the education of youth; for the neglect of education does harm to the constitution. The citizen should be molded to suit the form of government under

which he lives. For each government has a peculiar character which originally formed and which continues to preserve it. The character of democracy creates democracy, and the character of oligarchy creates oligarchy; and always the better the character, the better the government." Human beings may be born into a particular democracy or a particular oligarchy. But they are not by this very fact, to use Aristotle's word, "molded" or formed as citizens who possess the requisite thoughts and habits needed to be good citizens of that particular democracy or that particular oligarchy. They stand in need, as Aristotle makes clear in several places in the *Politics*, of an education in the regime and of an education relative to the regime.

Citizens in a liberal democracy especially need to undergo a political education. Liberal democracies such as America are regimes that hold forth the challenge of self-government, a challenge Lincoln famously spoke of in his moving description of America as a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people." Our liberal democracy needs informed citizens who know more than what the various branches of government are and what each branch can legitimately do—though, it undoubtedly needs citizens who know this. It needs citizens who have cultivated the habits of heart and mind that are needed to sustain the health and well-being of our experiment in self-government. Recognition of this fact occurs again and again in the writings of the Founders. George Washington punctuates this point in his "Farewell Address." And Thomas Jefferson makes this point when he observes that whenever "the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government" and when he advises to "educate and inform the whole mass of people . . . [since] they are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty."

Although different than a political education, a liberal education can, in some instances, complement a citizen's political education. I mentioned earlier that Aristotle speaks of the need for some citizens to gain an education relative to the regime. Through the pedagogy it advances in its laws and its distinctive way of life, a regime seeks to form a certain type of citizen: a democracy seeks to bring into existence a democrat and a communist state seeks to bring into existence a communist, and so forth. Yet each of these regimes carries within it the potential seeds of its own destruction. Each is powerfully tempted to take the thing it values most, be it equality and individual freedom or party and state loyalty, and radicalize this thing to the point that it eventually destroys the regime. What is needed, again at least in some of the regime's better citizens, is an appreciation of the need to talk up, in a sober and prudent way, those virtues that run counter to the regime's dominant tendencies.

For this reason, in a democracy such as America, citizens are needed who appreciate, and can articulate, the salutary role that extra-democratic and aristocratic virtues can play in a liberal democracy. This is the point John

Adams indirectly makes in his October 11, 1798 letter to the Massachusetts militia. Adams there states that "avarice, ambition, revenge, or gallantry, would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net. Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." Tocqueville makes a similar point through his famous remark that compared to their European cousins Americans are extraordinarily non-philosophic, perhaps even un-philosophic. Tocqueville further hints that this lack of philosophic zeal helps explain why Americans are politically able to bring together two things that their European forbearers insist do not go together: the spirit of liberty and the spirit of religion. By making these two points explicit, Tocqueville intimates that part of our nation's political health rests on the existence of a necessarily small group of civically *and* liberally educated Americans, a group perhaps akin to those whom Jefferson called "the natural aristocracy . . . the most precious gift of nature for the instruction, the trusts, and government of society." Having a genuine liberal education in addition to a civic education, such Americans would be in a position to recognize that the spirit of modern liberty and the spirit of religion theoretically pull in different directions *and* that great care must be taken to preserve the politically inner-vating tension that, when well-managed, can exist between these two things. In the 20th century, liberally educated men as diverse as the German Jewish émigré Leo Strauss and the Jesuit priest John Courtney Murray reminded American democracy of this important lesson. Keeping with the noble spirit of liberal education, I would be remiss if I did not mention what I can here only point out. While liberal education can complement a citizen's political education, the former can also call into question many of the latter's central claims, e.g., the self-sufficiency of the regime and political life, the justice contained in the regime's laws, and the adequacy and solidity of the kind of virtue political life instills in human beings.

But let me return to the expressed theme of this essay, the relation of liberal education to contemporary higher education. At present, American institutions of higher education routinely stress the importance of learning useful or practical things, things that will make us employable or prepare us to live in the so-called real world. On some level, this is understandable. To begin with the most crude of reasons, a college or university education in America costs a great deal of money. We should not be wholly surprised that students, parents, and banking institutions in our commercial republic want some assurance that they will see a return on their "educational investment." This partially explains why so many once small liberal arts colleges have become what are euphemistically now called comprehensive colleges. As more and more paying students have expressed an interest in learning a vocation at college, institutions of higher education have responded by expressing their willingness to expand students' pro-choice options in the name

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of "useful" pre-professional programs and majors. Perhaps this drift is somewhat unavoidable in a large, liberal democracy such as ours; perhaps large commercial republics such as ours are inevitably driven to push the less immediately felt, rarified concerns of a liberal education aside in the name of the more immediately felt democratic and pragmatic concerns of mass education and mass enlightenment.

Emphasis on the alleged need for higher education to be useful can also be seen in the effort to relate one's college or university education to something more elevated and less crass than the pursuit of a degreed, professional vocation. I have in mind the increased tendency of colleges and universities to tap into the idealism of young people by offering them the opportunity to experience life in what are commonly called "Living and Learning Centers" or to pursue majors that will prepare them to take posts in one of the proliferating numbers of NGOs. I want to be clear; the work that students may do in a Living and Learning Center may benefit many, many people. And the good that a student learns to do in a class that trains them to be responsible members of "the global community" might well be deserving of our praise. But such *training* focuses a student's attention on the importance of doing rather than thinking and knowing. Such training encourages students to view not only their education in terms of its utility, but, also, themselves in terms of their utility. It begs them to see themselves not so much as students seeking knowledge, but as future agents of change who will soon have an impact on the world. I note in passing that the first Living and Learning Center I visited was holding a social for faculty members in which Michael Jackson's saccharine "Heal the World," a song which at that point was already nine years old, was played over and over.

The insistence that university education be useful found powerful philosophical support in the writings of early modern philosophers such as Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke. Rene Descartes captured the thrust of this line of thought when he announced at the beginning of his *Discourse on Method* that he vowed to direct his intellectual energies towards "gaining knowledge which would be very useful in life, and of discovering a practical philosophy which might replace the speculative philosophy taught in the schools." Descartes' maxim found a welcome home in America. American luminaries have long stressed the utility of education. Benjamin Franklin is famous, among other things, for saying "genius without education is like silver in the mine." But he also preached that "an investment in knowledge always pays the best interest." Similarly, John Dewey, arguably the most influential American theorist of education, unapologetically trumpeted there "is no such thing as educational value in the abstract. The notion that some subjects and methods and that acquaintance with certain facts and truths possess educational value in and of themselves is the reason why traditional education reduced the material of education so largely to a diet of predi-

gested materials.” More recently, E.D. Hirsch tried to persuade us of the importance of getting an education in “cultural literacy,” a broadly shared body of purportedly culturally relevant reference points that allegedly could be used to bind the American people together.

Judged by these standards, a liberal education seems pretty useless. I will quote Aristotle one last time. Drawing a distinction between a useful and a liberal education, he states that there “can be no doubt that children should be taught those useful things which are really necessary, but not all useful things; for occupations are divided into liberal and illiberal; young children should be imparted only such kinds of knowledge as will be useful to them without vulgarizing them. And any occupation, art, or science, which makes the body or soul or mind of the freeman less fit for the practice or exercise of virtue, is vulgar.” I have yet to see a job advertisement that reads “entry level liberally educated person wanted, competitive salary and benefits.” What is more, in my experience, most students tend to think that Socrates’ words about the *eidōs* and the realm outside the cave and Augustine’s words about the transcendent and eternal city of God speak of worlds far less real than the workaday world they anxiously plan on entering after graduation—or, in some of my students’ cases, less real than the cyber-status-world they obsessively check on their iPhones.

Yet it would be a mistake to think that a liberal education has no connection to a practical or useful education, to the kind of education that helps us do things, even do things well. We have already noted the connection that can exist between a liberal education and a civic or political education. But it must also be pointed out that a liberal education regularly has to make use of many things that we learn through other forms of education. A liberal education requires students to possess a host of useful—and often hard-to-develop—skills and proficiencies. Students who undertake a liberal education must be able to read well; they must be able to speak well; they must be able to write well; they must be able to think well; they must be able to argue well; they might even need to be able to read foreign languages such as French, Italian, German, Latin, Hebrew, and Greek well. Being able to read Aquinas in Latin or Aristophanes in Greek is neither identical to, nor a substitute for, a genuinely liberal education. Knowing Greek or Latin does not, contrary to some puffed-up classicists’ claims, miraculously make someone liberally educated. However, it can help one acquire a liberal education. By contemporary higher education standards, a liberal education may be useless, but it could not occur unless we had already learned a number of useful and valuable things.

The halls of contemporary higher education also place great emphasis on original academic research. For example, one of the more chi-chi academic trends peddled at today’s colleges and universities encourages precocious and ambitious undergraduate students to engage in “faculty-mentored origi-

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nal research projects." Like he did with so many other things, Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, presciently described the psychic motive behind this present-day desire to stand out or to be "original." In his discussion of democratic literature, he notes that "the mind" of a writer in a democratic age is apt to be "unattached to that of his fellows by tradition or common habits." Under such conditions, the "object of authors" increasingly will be to express their thoughts in ways that "astonish." The belief that a college or university education should push us to be creatively original or to stand out on display like one of Don Draper's slick marketing campaigns runs from the mindboggling assumption that uniformed, fresh-faced undergraduates know enough to know if their research is original, let alone produce "original" research, up to the standard claim made by Ph.D. programs that a doctoral student's dissertation should make an original contribution to their specialized field of study.

Apart from the question of how original each of these purported contributions really is, awareness of this thing called liberal education should prod us to ask the more important and fundamental question whether academic or scholarly originality is unquestionably desirable in the first place. Awareness of this thing called liberal education ought to prod us to reflect upon how easily the desire for academic or scholarly originality can—and too often does—outstrip the student's or teacher's desire to pursue knowledge for its own sake. By any measure, it is easier to stand out than it is to cultivate and possess real knowledge. Knowledge literally speaks of a knowing with (*conscientia*). Knowledge stands with, not apart; it requires relation, not isolation. Xenophon's *Symposium* reports that while Socrates was known occasionally to ply his trade while dancing alone, Plato's *Apology* relates that *if* there is an afterlife, Socrates plans on continuing his practice of dialectically engaging others—a jarring claim given that he says this after having just been sentenced to death for dialectically engaging the most notable young citizens of Athens. That we come to acquire knowledge by standing with others is, after all, one of the reasons why we have schools. There is something misguided or misplaced in our pursuit of academic originality and our celebration of avant-garde academics. To be fair, there is reason to think that the academic desire to stand out is not simply a late modern phenomenon. It very well may be a hazard that comes with the territory. Shakespeare, whose plays cannot be categorized as sterling examples of either democratic literature or Nietzschean creative expression, memorably has his Jacques, in *As You Like It*, tweak "the scholar's melancholy, which is emulation."

Liberal education, as I have tried to intimate, necessarily occupies a tension-ridden place in human life. It occupies a tension-ridden place when placed alongside other forms of education. It occupies a tension-ridden place within the distinctive, educational society that is the college or university.

And it occupies a tension-ridden place in any particular regime or political community, including the modern democratic regime.

What, then, are we clinging to when we insist upon exposing students in contemporary colleges and universities to the kind of questions, books, and dialogues that cultivate a liberal education? We are clinging to the well-formed—and hard-won—judgment that something of vital human importance is missing in an education that does not ask students to think long and hard about what it means to be a human being. We are clinging to the well-formed—and hard-won—judgment that as human beings we should ask fundamental questions about the “human things” in light of all that we know, even if dimly, about ourselves and the whole we inhabit. We are clinging to the well-formed—and hard-won—judgment that as teachers we have a responsibility to our students to introduce them to a kind of education that can help prepare them, imperfectly and incompletely to be sure, to live as human beings. Such education alerts us to the importance of being the kind of being that stands out by standing—and thinking—with other *logos*-bearing beings, whether they are found in our family, school, town, country, Church, or universe. This is the tension-ridden, but exhilarating and challenging, place that liberal education finds itself in the world of contemporary higher education. And it is the place that liberal education will continue to find itself for the foreseeable future.