

# 10 ■ The Idea of Liberal Education

The volume of noise made about education all over the country for many years now has, in recent months, increased to such a crescendo that no man with a sane mind should try to add a note to it. Yet this is what I am doing. There is, of course, always some justification for talking about education: the desire to clarify the problem itself and to outline certain principles of education that ought to underline all possible practical applications. The problem of education, and certainly of liberal education, has nothing to do with satellites, rocketry, the organization or disorganization of the Pentagon, or the Soviet Union. And yet it is not by chance, as we shall see, that these topics creep into all that educational talk. Nor can it be spoken about in the jargon of educational psychology that takes for granted a great many things and ignores even more. I shall use simple terms at the risk of being trite and saying things that everyone seems to know anyhow. All I want is to remind you of things that you do know.

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## I

Every one of us (that is, every human being on this earth, without exception) is in some way educated. By this I mean that everyone assimilates from his early childhood sets of customs, beliefs, opinions of all kinds, ways of behavior, and even ways of feeling and reacting. Without this elemental kind of education we could not become members of our families, of clans, and of all the smaller or larger communities to which we belong. To be a human being means to be educated in this elemental way, to be educated in the elements of human life. Ours is a double growth, double nourishment, double ripening. Our maturity as human beings does not necessarily coincide with our maturity as living organisms, whereas no such discrepancy seems to exist in the case of our incomprehensible cousins, the animals. The nourishment that leads to our human maturity is provided for us by our parents, our friends, by the innumerable relations, associations, and hierarchies that bind us to the life of our communities; most of the time we are rather passive recipients of this kind of feeding, the lowest and yet perhaps most important level of what I have called elemental education. Most of the time, we are not even aware of it.

We are much more aware of another level of elemental education, the one that takes place through what is loosely called "experience." When we invoke experience, we mean mainly the disappointments, difficulties, troubles, obstacles, sufferings, and catastrophes that we have encountered, succumbed to or overcome, and keep anticipating. We become wise (not all of us, to be sure) through such adverse experiences. An elemental generalization takes place, variously called ritual, or tradition, or "ways of doing things," or "the wisdom of the ages."

And at this point a new medium of education comes to the fore, the medium of deliberate reflection and of systematic procedure. In this medium the troubles and obstacles are lifted, by a process of conscious formalization, to a new level, the theoretical level. They become problems. How to solve them has to be learned: formal disciplines are required to bring a problem into focus; that is, to disentangle the kernel from the shell, to proceed methodically, to aid our memory, to make visible what is obscure. This cannot be done without effort and, just

as experience is basically painful, formal learning is intrinsically difficult. What I am now describing is the way of formal education that grows out of our elemental education and remains rooted in it. We can dispense with it only at the expense of our winning clarity and greater skills and greater ease to cope with the necessities of life.

Have I now given a complete story of education? Obviously not. I spoke of lifting the troubles and obstacles encountered in experience to a new level that I call theoretical, and I introduced the notion of formal disciplines that have to be mastered before theoretical problems can be solved. But how does this lifting take place? How is elemental education transformed into formal education? Did I not skip something crucial at this point? I did. I neglected to mention the level of that lifting and transforming operation: our questioning. I have, therefore, to retrace my steps and to digress quite a bit in order to consider the phenomenon of questioning at some length.

## II

There are many ways of questioning and as many, of course, of answering. Most of our questions are concerned with actions and the means to carry them out. Not only questions like these: "How do you do that?" or "How does one proceed to achieve this end?" but also ones like these: "Have you a pencil?" or "Where is Swarthmore Avenue?" For these latter questions mean that I need a pencil to write something down and that I have to go to that street for some definite purpose. Most questions are indeed of a practical nature; that is, they refer to our doing and acting. Another class of question is formed by queries of a gossipy nature, stemming from our passions—for example, from malice, grudge, vanity, or envy. I suspect that this class of questions is numerically as large as the first one, if not larger. And closely related to the gossipy class there exists a class of questions rooted in what may be called "idle curiosity." It is worthwhile to reflect for a moment upon the nature of idle curiosity, a curiosity, that is, not guided by any malevolent or benevolent feelings. All gossip has an element of curiosity in it, of wonderment, and that means some quest, however infinitesimal,

however distorted, for knowledge. If we were to adopt the metaphor "body of knowledge," we might perhaps say, using a famous phrase from recent political and military history, that gossip constitutes the soft underbelly of knowledge. Gossip is the small tribute that our passionate and appetitive life pays — in very, very small coins — to intellectual life. And it may even reach a nobler part of the body of knowledge, if channeled in a proper direction. This brings us to still another class of questions, where idle curiosity is replaced by a kind of passionate or, if you please, serious curiosity. Questions raised out of idle curiosity are, strictly speaking, none of our business. But when we raise them because we attach very definite importance to the answers — that is, when we make it our business to know the answers — we deal with questions of a different nature. In a trial, where crucial facts have to be established, or in our travels, confronting unfamiliar customs, we ask questions in order to win certainty about things, situations, people and their character, and so forth. Such queries could be properly called exploratory questions. In raising them we want to know, either in order to base a judgement on the knowledge obtained or just simply in order to know. It must be granted that it is not always easy to draw the line between idle curiosity and this nobler kind of curiosity. And I should add, of course, that there are other kinds of questions that do not quite fall into the classes I have mentioned — for example, polite questions, affectionate questions, rhetorical questions — that we need not consider now.

Whatever the difference between these kinds of questions, the practical ones, the gossipy ones, the exploratory ones, and all the others, they all have something in common. They all originate within the horizon of our daily lives, a horizon that includes the familiar and the surprising, routine and novelty, that which has precedents and that which has not. The usual and the unusual are labels put on things and events within the frame of our common and conflicting experience. The unexpected is still woven out of the texture of the expected. And it is this frame of the fundamentally familiar that actually allows us to formulate our questions. That is: they can be put into words. Our questioning is guided by language itself, which is oriented toward the world around us as we know it, including

those parts or elements or factors that in some way remain hidden to us. There are usually some dark corners behind or beneath pieces of furniture in a room full of light. The world has many such dark corners. Questions of the kind I have mentioned are like flashlights, the beam of which we direct towards those dark corners. This beam is our language. And it is not too difficult to see that the articulations of language correspond to the ways in which we raise questions and try to answer them. Aristotle, in his analysis of language, has shown how the various modes of being which determine the structure of what we call a world, our world, our not too hospitable home, are prefigured in the various forms of our questioning. The names of his categories are, for the most part, interrogatives.

Let me now consider another aspect of our questioning: In raising a question we expect an answer. A question, by its very nature, wants to be satisfied. Or, in other words, questions as such are possible (including the so-called impossible ones) only on the assumption that there is something which we do not know but which can be known. And this something is expected to appear in any answer. A question is indeed a state of mind (the state of mind of us as questioning beings) in which we want to know what we do not know. The phenomenon of questioning points to the possibility, at least, of knowledge. The answer that we get is, for the most part, an opinion. We live, for the most part, in holding and meeting opinions. But the important thing about opinions is precisely that they cannot avoid putting on the cloak of knowledge. The possibility of our having opinions rests on the possibility, at least, of our having truth. In our thoughtful moments — and there are not too many — we try to see whether our opinions, our answers to questions, are true or not.

Questioning, then, presupposes as unquestionable that there is something not known: the unknown. And it does that, it seems to me, in two fundamentally different ways. The unknown is understood either as something not yet known or as something once known but forgotten. Whatever the relation between time and the substance or state of knowledge, the temporal character of questioning compels us to envisage the way to knowledge in this double temporal perspective. The way to knowledge can

be understood either as the pursuit of the not yet known (as discovery of the not yet known) or as the pursuit of the once known (as recovery of the once known). Prophecy and divining are the primordial forms of the first kind of pursuit, myth-making the primordial form of the second kind. Derivative forms (by this term I do not mean to imply any censure) are what we call science and history. Science is forever on the way to discover the not yet known; history is forever recovering the once known. Both embody the type of questioning that I have called the exploratory kind in its purest form. But both also depend on a quite different kind of questioning that I have, with some trepidation, to consider now.

I have said before that within the confines of our horizon there is the expected as well as the unexpected, the old and the new, the known and the unknown, the familiar and the unfamiliar. We do, however, experience a kind of question which, as it were, tends to smash the bounds that limit us. We do occasionally stop altogether and face the familiar as if for the first time — anything: a person, a street, the sky, a fly. The overwhelming impression on such occasions is the strangeness of the thing we contemplate. This state of mind requires detachment, and I am not at all certain to what extent we can contrive its presence. We suddenly do not feel at home in this world of ours. We take a deep look at things, at people, at words, with eyes blind to the familiar. We re-reflect. Plato has a word for it: *metastrophē* or *periagogē*, a turnabout, a conversion. We detach ourselves from all that is familiar to us; we change the direction of our inquiry; we do not explore the unknown any more; on the contrary, we convert the known into an unknown. We wonder. And we burst out with that inexorable question: Why is that so? To be sure, we have raised the question “why” before. I can certainly ask: Why did it snow yesterday and does not snow today? Why did Mr. X say this or that to Mr. Y? But this “why” I am talking about now is of a different kind. It does not lead to any discovery or recovery. It calls myself in question with all my questioning. It compels me to detach myself from myself, to transcend the limits of my horizon; that is, it educates me. It gives me the freedom to go to the roots of all my questioning. I can begin to understand that even our gossiping may ultimately rest on the transcendent power of this “why”; that even the

children's "why," repeated endlessly to the disgust of their mothers and fathers, may ultimately derive from the human possibility of a total conversion.

### III

It is time to revert to the point that prompted me to digress into a consideration of the phenomenon of questioning. The question was: How does elemental education transform itself into formal education? I can try to answer that now.

Elemental education that comes to us through experience, and mostly through adverse experiences, congeals into many kinds of habitual opinions and traditional beliefs. But human questioning never stops. In particular, there is the tendency to go to the roots of our experience, to explore the not yet known or the once known but forgotten. On the other hand, we are bound, at some point at least, to reflect, in wonderment and detachment, not only on all that offers itself to our exploration, on all the visible, the audible, and the intelligible about us, but also on our doing this questioning and exploring, on the means and tools that we use in this enterprise, on ourselves as questioning and exploring beings. This metastrophic reflection, in conjunction with our exploratory questioning, leads us to the establishment of those formal disciplines that I mentioned before. The phenomenon of language, for example (it is only an example, but a significant one), presents itself to us in all its strangeness. We reflect about it, about our speaking to each other. And in exploring this phenomenon this is what we see: we understand each other in speaking and, no doubt, we also misunderstand each other, the latter perhaps more easily than the former. But it is not difficult for us to see that all misunderstanding is based on some understanding. In our speaking, in our language, we convey to each other thoughts that we want to be understood, and we achieve this purpose in spite of all the failings that we may experience. This means that we know how to speak, even if our speech is imperfect. We know how to link words with each other, how to arrange a sequence of such assemblages of words, how to emphasize or de-emphasize some of them, how to make sense, how to tell what we mean,

and how to conceal what we mean. Not only do we know how to speak—that is, to speak imperfectly—we also know about this very imperfection. This knowledge, if formalized and formulated, becomes the discipline of grammar. It is of little use in our actual speaking, and yet, upon reflection, we cannot fail to see how utterly dependent on grammatical forms we are in our actual speaking. A similar reflection upon speech leads us to the formal discipline of logic. And I should like, at the risk of being tiresome, to add another example derived from a continuing reflection upon our speech. The act of speaking presupposes the distinguishing of one word from another and the relating of one word to another. It presupposes, that is, counting. For counting is distinguishing and at the same time relating one thing to another. At all times, therefore, speaking and the thinking involved in it have been understood as a sort of computing. This does not mean that in speaking we have an explicit knowledge of numbers. But reflecting and pursuing our exploratory questioning, we arrive at the formal discipline of arithmetic; that is, the science of numbers and their relations on which all our computing is based.

There is no limit to the further exploration of those formal disciplines. They get enlarged and refined, branch off into other disciplines, combine and support each other, and finally encompass whatever might be knowable in our world; they become all the scientific and historical disciplines taught and learned around the globe. Their acquisition is called *formal education*. And I can repeat now with somewhat greater clarity what I said earlier: formal education grows out of elemental education but remains rooted in it. The formal disciplines come into being as the result of our human ability to detach ourselves from our familiar and conflicting experiences, to turn about, to ask the radical question “why” and to persist in it, pursuing at the same time the exploratory questioning within the horizon in which we live. That is why the theoretical level thus reached always remains a two-sided one: the formal disciplines and sciences can also be applied disciplines and sciences; theoretical problems have or can have direct relation to our doing and making, to our practical life. It is only when we dedicate ourselves to the radical, metastrophic questioning, when we free ourselves from the ever-present concern that the burden of life imposes

upon us, that formal education becomes *liberal education*, that the formal disciplines become liberal disciplines or liberal arts. Obviously, this is a precarious and even perilous kind of business. But I do not know of anything worthwhile that is not precarious and perilous.

## IV

The idea of liberal education was conceived by the Greeks. For them it meant an education proper to the free and noble men in contradistinction to slaves and other people engaged in any kind of menial work. To be a free man meant to be a man enjoying leisure—that is, precisely, a man not under any necessity or compulsion to do servile work. But to have leisure in turn meant primarily dealing with affairs of the state, pursuing political ends, and also pursuing knowledge and wisdom. The Greek word for leisure, *scholē*, is significantly the root of the word “school” in Latin as well as in all our vernacular languages. Leisure meant schooling; that is, the opportunity to learn. The history of education is the history of the meaning of the term “school.” Let me quote from Aristotle’s *Politics* (VIII,3): “Nature herself, as has often been said, requires that we should be able not only to work well, but to use leisure well; for, as I must repeat once and again, the first principle of all action [that is, the end for the sake of which any action is undertaken] is leisure . . . and therefore the question must be asked in good earnest, What ought we to do when at leisure? Clearly we ought not to be amusing ourselves, for then amusement would be the end of life.” And Aristotle goes on: “It is clear, then, that there are branches of learning and education which we must study with a view to the enjoyment of leisure, and these are to be valued for their own sake.” To study for the enjoyment of leisure and in leisure means to be engaged in liberal education. It is an arduous task. This kind of education does not look for some goal or good beyond itself. It is in itself its own end. Long before Aristotle and long after him, even under totally different social conditions, this statement defined liberal learning and liberal education. What this understanding of liberal education assumes is that man’s most proper and specific character is his desire to

know. Only in pursuing this goal is man really man and really free. To acquire the various means that enable man to persist in this pursuit is to cultivate the arts of freedom.

The idea of liberal education, then, whether you accept or reject it, is not definable in terms of some peculiar subject matter. Some applied sciences may well fall outside its scope. But, by and large, any formal discipline may form its vehicle and basis. It is not the subject matter that determines the character of studies as liberal studies. It is rather the way in which a formal discipline, a subject matter, is taken up that is decisive: whenever it is being studied for its own sake, whenever the metastrophic way of questioning is upheld, whenever genuine wonderment is present, liberal education is taking place.

Foremost among the formal liberal disciplines are, of course, the mathematical disciplines, the physical sciences, the science of life, the sciences of language—grammar, rhetoric, and logic—and also the great works of literature, those incomparable mirrors of man. But it is a rather fantastic idea to equate liberal studies with the so-called humanities; as if mathematical and scientific disciplines were less human than historical or poetic or philosophical studies. And do we not know that philosophy itself can be studied in the most illiberal way?

## V

Liberal education is a precarious and even perilous kind of business. Let me show you the great obstacles that stand in its way. These obstacles are not external impediments, nor do they stem from nonrational sources in man. On the contrary, these obstacles are rooted in what is specifically human in man, and it is not possible not to meet them.

1. The first obstacle is the learning situation itself. What is the ideal learning situation? It is the more or less continuous contact between a student and his teacher, who is another student, more advanced in many ways, but still learning, himself. This situation usually does not prevail; in fact, it is extremely rare. Since time immemorial, institutions of learning, especially higher learning, have been established, called "schools"—and

the ambiguity of the term becomes immediately apparent. Institutionalization means ordering of activities into certain patterns; in the case of learning activities, into classes, schedules, courses, curriculums, examinations, degrees, and all the venerable and sometimes ridiculous paraphernalia of academic life. The point is that such institutionalization cannot be avoided: both the gregarious and the rational character of man compel him to impose upon himself laws and regulations. Moreover, the discipline of learning itself seems to require an orderly and planned procedure. And yet we all know how this schedule routine can interfere with the spontaneity of questioning and of learning and the occurrence of genuine wonderment. A student may even never become aware that there is the possibility of spontaneous learning which depends merely on himself and on nobody and nothing else. Once the institutional character of learning tends to prevail, the goal of liberal education may be completely lost sight of, whatever other goals may be successfully reached. And I repeat, this obstacle is not extraneous to learning. It is prefigured in the methodical and systematic character of exploratory questioning. It has to be faced over and over again.

2. The second obstacle to liberal education is our condition as heirs of intellectual traditions. Here again, it is man's own rational nature that brings this obstacle about. Animals do not pass on their skills to their progeny in such a way that those skills can accumulate and grow. Man, and only man, does precisely that. His skills and knowledges are many-storied edifices. Each generation adds something to what has been previously built and preserved. We are proud of this fact and call it progress. And, indeed, such progress does exist in definite areas. But this very fact confronts us with the ever-present danger of sedimentation, fossilization, or petrification of our knowledge. We are fond of pointing to the European universities of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries which exhibit those petrifying tendencies rather clearly and are prone to exalt the fresh wind of the Renaissance and Humanism that blew all the accumulated dust away. But it behooves us to look at our own institutions of higher learning and to discern these same tendencies among us. We are not immune. This danger is inherent in all learning and all

scholarship, and liberal education can never ignore it.

3. But the most serious obstacle is the relation of liberal education to the political community, the state. The Greeks, you remember, saw in leisure, in schooling, the source of a twofold activity: the pursuit of learning and of political ends. Greek thought, in fact, circles continuously about these two highest poles of human life. The relation of man to his citizenship, to the obligations that flow from his being a citizen, a member of a political community—this relation is one of the great and standing themes of all classical philosophy. Man conceived as a political animal and man conceived as a being desirous to know are not necessarily identical. What complicates matters is the immediate and compelling interest that any state takes in the education of its children and youth. Plato's *Republic* is devoted to this theme. Aristotle says (*Politics*, V, 9): "Of all things I have mentioned, that which most contributes to the permanence of constitutions is the adaptation of education to the form of government," and (in VIII, 1): "No one will doubt that the legislator should direct his attention above all to the education of youth, or that the neglect of education does harm to states. The citizen should be moulded to suit the form of government under which he lives." And let us listen to champions of political doctrines differing sharply from the conservative and aristocratic views of Aristotle. We all know how decisive Jefferson considered education to be for the preservation of the republican form of government. In a letter to John Adams (October 28, 1813), for example, he speaks of a bill he had prepared but which was not adopted by the Virginia legislature: "It was a bill for the more general diffusion of learning. This proposed to divide every county into wards of five or six miles square, like your townships; to establish in each ward a free school for reading, writing, and common arithmetic; to provide for the annual selection of the best subjects from these schools, who might receive, at the public expense, a higher degree of education at a district school; and from these district schools to select a certain number of the most promising subjects, to be completed at an university, where all the useful sciences should be taught. Worth and genius would thus have been sought out from every condition of life and completely prepared by education for defeating the competition of

wealth and birth for public trusts." This educational scheme is conceived as a means to an end, a political end. And Horace Mann, in the middle of the nineteenth century, has this to say: "The establishment of a republican government without well-appointed and efficient means for the universal education of the people is the most rash and foolhardy experiment ever tried by man." How often is the phrase "education for citizenship" used in our schools today! I need not mention the present-day pressure for a change in the educational system of the country to be undertaken for the sake of political ends. The demands of the political community to which we belong are indeed inexorable. It is important to understand, however, that the idea of liberal education cannot be easily reconciled with those demands. It is important to see that there is a definite tension between the exigencies of political life and the self-sustained goal of liberal education. This tension is very great. Consider that ultimately the existence of a state (any state) involves the question of life and death for any of its members. But consider also that no less is at stake for a commitment to leisure in the true understanding of this word. I can hardly think of a better illustration of that tension than the story of Archimedes' death, which I shall recount by way of conclusion.

There are many versions of that story. It seems, at any rate, that Archimedes took an active and even decisive part in the defense of Syracuse, his home town, when it was besieged by the enemy, and he contrived, by means of ingenious machinery, to repel the attacker. He was fulfilling his civic duty. His end came when a Roman soldier stepped close to the place where he was drawing his figures on the sand. This is how Plutarch relates one of the versions: "A Roman soldier, running upon him with a drawn sword, offered to kill him . . . . Archimedes, looking back, earnestly besought him to hold his hand a little while, that he might not leave what he was then at work upon inconclusive and imperfect; but the soldier, nothing moved by his entreaty, instantly killed him." The figures on the sand and the problem they represented were for Archimedes a question of life and death; or should we perhaps say a question of more than life and death? Whether this story be true or not, it makes us see the precarious position that is the lot of any genuine

searching and questioning; it makes us see the ultimate incommensurability between this kind of searching and questioning, the basis of all liberal learning, and the implacable conditions of our existence. But what would the world be like if that searching and questioning were not possible at all?