Do the Liberal Arts Still Matter?
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We live in a culture that more and more equates education with vocational training. The average American would scoff at the suggestion that the main goal of education, especially at the undergraduate level, should be anything other than this. So spelling out the reasons why a liberal arts education is valuable and a reasonable course of study has become a significant part of my job as the president of a great books college that only offers a B.A. degree in liberal arts.

Whenever I have talked about the benefits of a liberal arts education, I have always stressed how the liberal arts help the individual. Over the course of the last few years, however, I have spent more time thinking about the benefits of a liberal arts education for society as a whole.

Defining a Liberal Arts Education

Liberal arts has an ancient pedigree. From the historical perspective, it has a far better claim to the label “traditional education” than does education today. The current notion of education, with its emphasis on training for the workplace, is the modern innovation.

I am using the term “liberal arts” in its broadest sense: not to designate a particular set of content nor a particular method of instruction but rather to designate a set of values with respect to what education is and what it should accomplish. I could use other terms to capture this concept: “liberal education” or “the humanities” because the humanities focus on the question “What does it mean to be human?” The liberal arts, in this broad sense, can best be described by its philosophical commitments and its attitude toward education. A liberal arts education, worthy of the name, has two critical features: (1) a broad based and general education emphasizing an understanding of the whole rather than the parts; and (2) an emphasis on how to live wisely rather than how to make a good living. In other words, a liberal arts education focuses on what it means to live life as a human being. Let me explain both of these features a little more fully.

The first critical feature of a liberal arts education is its emphasis on breadth of knowledge. The goal is to help students come to a well rounded understanding of reality, drawing on the contributions of various disciplines. Students need to have good acquaintance with philosophy, literature, history, theology, art, and science. Each of these disciplines gives us unique insights about the human experience. To think that a student can gain a deep understanding of each of these disciplines is unrealistic, but students can be introduced to each discipline adequately to appreciate the contributions each makes to an understanding of reality. Students are then encouraged to put together the insights of the various disciplines into a coherent whole. In order to do this, students must develop a reliable understanding of the strengths and limitations of each discipline: what kinds of issues each discipline illuminates, what kinds of issues are out of its reach, and how reliable its conclusions are. Let me cite just one example. Some claim that science has a uniquely powerful method that assures us of the findings of this discipline. We must recognize, however, that this claim is merely an assertion that cannot be supported by science’s own methodology. The claim of some practitioners of science that their findings are inherently more reliable is nothing more than a prejudice—it lacks demonstration. So the findings of science do not necessarily trump the conclusions of other disciplines, as some would have us believe. Liberal arts students, over the entire course of their study, learn what each discipline has to contribute to an understanding of reality—and what it cannot contribute.

This emphasis of liberal arts on breadth of learning has a couple of implications. First, since students have to study the whole array of disciplines, they cannot just choose that which is easiest for them. They are forced to learn skills and concepts that do not come easily. They are stretched, and they gain confidence that they can learn things they once thought they were unfit to learn. They are also exposed to a vast array of interesting information of which they were previously ignorant. As a result, their range of interests grows in ways that even the students themselves could not have predicted.

Second, in order to learn all of the major disciplines, students must learn basic learning skills. In order to study the natural sciences, students must have...
some math skills. In order to study philosophy, students must have language skills. In order to be able to process and communicate what they are learning in any field, students must have thinking and writing skills. Every student must learn to write, think, read, and calculate. A liberal arts education therefore places a heavy emphasis on the development of basic learning skills.

The second critical feature of the liberal arts education is its goal of teaching students how to live life well. In other times throughout the world, the goal of education was to pass on to the younger generation the accumulated wisdom of a society with respect to how to live a good life. Only in relatively modern times has that purpose been greatly downgraded, if not eliminated.

The modern approach to education emphasizes training for the workplace. The assumption seems to be that living well is easy and that the key to living well is having enough money. Education should therefore skip the fluff and get right down to business teaching students how to earn money. I hope you recognize how dominant this assumption has become in our culture. I am convinced that the vast majority of Americans would say that training for the workplace is the primary purpose for education at all levels.

There are many reasons for the movement in this direction that I cannot explore here, but it is important to recognize that education has all but abandoned the task of passing on its wisdom with respect to living life well, at a time when the most likely alternative institutions to perform the task, family and church, are particularly weak. As a result, our society is raising up young people who are more at sea with respect to how to live life wisely than any generation our culture has ever produced. As a result, an inordinate number of young adults are clueless about how to deal with the various difficulties life throws at them. This is a monumental tragedy that has yet to play out completely.

**Historical Background**

The liberal arts approach to education goes way back in our cultural tradition to Greek times and continued to reign supreme in Roman, medieval, and even up to modern times. Only in the past one and a half centuries has its dominance been challenged.

The word “liberal” in liberal arts derives from the fact that a liberal education was the kind of education deemed appropriate for a “free man” in contrast to a slave. Free men, who for much of this time period would have been called “aristocrats,” were responsible for a wide range of decision-making activities—duties and responsibilities considered the cost of their freedom. The history of the modern era is the story of the dismantling of this old order and its transformation into decentralized societies. The transformation was not easy nor rapid. Nor was it steady in the same direction. Progress was by fits and starts, but the trend was clear: movement was away from the feudal order toward a democratic order. The consequence of this march toward democracy is that political decisions have been taken out of the hands of the aristocracy and placed in the hands of the people at large.

This shift to decentralization made educating more people essential. In the medieval period, when the aristocracy made all significant political and economic decisions—which could be very complex, requiring significant knowledge and foresight—the aristocracy were given an extensive education to prepare them to exercise these responsibilities wisely. The kind of education deemed appropriate was a general education that emphasized an understanding of the whole rather than specialization, basic learning skills rather than mere information transmission, and the spiritual and moral values befitting a human being living life before God rather than efficiency. In short, the aristocracy were given a liberal arts education. The common man, who played an insignificant role in the economy and politics, was rarely educated. In the eighteenth century, many thinkers understood that in order for decentralized order to function well, the average person needed to be well educated. Essentially, the training that the aristocracy received exclusively in the medieval period now needed to be given to everyone.

In the two centuries since Adam Smith (author of *Wealth of Nations*, 1776) and the American founding fathers talked about the importance of education for democracy and liberal economics, the need has not diminished. If anything, it has become ever more critical. The government has expanded its range of activity and has become involved in ever more complex issues, including difficult issues of ethics in medicine, intellectual rights to genetically engineered organisms, and strategic arms treaties. The world’s economy has also become far more complex. Globalization has created an extremely complex economy, and the use of macroeconomic tools is taking the economy into completely uncharted territory. Participating in this political and economic world makes the need for a liberal arts education ever greater.

**What is at Stake**

Economic and political activity is largely problem solving, and the most critical part of problem solving is correctly and precisely identifying the problem. A book by Edward Tenner, *Why Things Bite Back: Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences* (1996), has had a huge impact on my thinking. The book consists of a long list of so-called technological advances that in one way or another backfired. For
example, Tenner cites boxing gloves as a technological advance designed to make boxing less brutal (bloody) but which actually resulted in making boxing more brutal because boxers could hit harder. Boxing with gloves caused less apparent injury, but it did irreparable damage to the brain.

A study of the history of intellectual thought in the Western world shows us a similar phenomenon. Every generation does a pretty good job of identifying social, political, or economic problems made by the generation before. The record for solving those problems is abysmal, however, because the true nature of the problem is not correctly identified. Let me give some examples.

Karl Marx diagnosed a problem and prescribed a treatment that resulted in the deaths of tens of millions of people in a series of communist revolutions in more than a dozen countries—and solved nothing. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn illustrated this point in his book *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973), pointing out that the revolution had not brought about any substantive change; it had only replaced one set of oppressors with another. This was not what Marx had intended.

Another example of misdiagnosing the essence of a problem is the social welfare programs of the mid-1900s. At first blush, the problem of poverty seemed obvious: not enough money. So then the solution is easy: give the poor money. And that is what the welfare programs were set up to do. After a few decades, however, these welfare programs clearly were not achieving their goals. Instead of helping the poor overcome their poverty, the programs resulted in keeping them poor and inculcating a dependence on the money and the services of the state. So instead of eradicating poverty, the programs perpetuated and even encouraged the spread of poverty.

A society cannot avoid misdiagnosing problems and the unintended negative consequences. These challenges are ultimately the result of man’s sinfulness and play a redemptive role in our lives. But we can try to minimize these problems, and liberal arts education is one way. A significant cause of problem misdiagnosis stems from specialization and expertise. Expertise per se is not bad, but it must be married with a picture of the whole and a sound understanding of the nature of man or else it becomes narrow. By focusing on the area of specialization, it is easy to lose track of the broader context. To understand a field of knowledge divorced from its context is to misunderstand the field of knowledge. The problem is not seeing the forest for the trees.

Another problem that often arises in a culture of expertise is arrogance. A society’s constant and unquestioning turning to experts for their wisdom in their areas tends to promote a sense that experts are so knowledgeable that their judgments, within their fields, are beyond dispute. This can encourage arrogance. But a healthy dose of exposure to how vast and complex this universe is and a sober look at the history of man can help take the edge off that arrogance. History is littered with the casualties of hubris. Therefore a liberal arts education can help temper the narrowness and the arrogance of expertise.

I have been giving examples of how our neglect of the liberal arts has left us vulnerable to the misdiagnoses of problems and the ensuing unintended consequences. But another element of education that has fallen by the wayside in this era of training for the workplace is moral education. As a society, we have allowed ourselves to lose sight of the fact that we live our lives before a righteous God who will one day judge us. This used to be a cornerstone of our culture’s worldview but has been melting away for many decades now, largely because reflection on the fact that we are created moral beings answerable to the One who created us is not part of our modern, vocationalized education. This has huge implications for society.

As an undergraduate, I studied in what was then the Soviet Union. I met an interesting man there who was working hard to make sense of life. He had recently become a Christian as a result of observing the degeneration of morality all around him. He reasoned that communism, as a worldview, had no place for morality; and yet, as he saw Russia become a moral wasteland, he became convinced that morality is an integral part of human existence. I remember thinking what a great place Russia would be if it were not for the oppressive Soviet rule. When Soviet power fell, I was delighted to return to Russia on a research trip, but I was shocked and depressed by what I saw: a society in collapse. I was particularly struck by the signs of a new economic order coming into being. People were hawking and selling everything, everywhere. They were attempting to institute free enterprise, but it was ugly! One day I bought a bag of apples from a man sitting at a makeshift stand. He had prepackaged the apples in small paper bags and was selling them by the bag. When I got home and began to take apples out of the bag, I discovered that all of the apples under the top layer were rotten.

This incident caused me to reflect on how the form of free enterprise coming into being in Russia differed from the free enterprise I learned from my culture—namely, that it is based on exchanges in which the two parties both come away better off than before the exchange. This kind of win-win exchange is a “fair exchange.” What I saw developing in Russia was “opportunism”; the goal of each exchange was to come away from the transaction with as much gain as possible. It occurred to me that opportunism is the inevitable outcome when free enterprise is applied in a moral wasteland.
I realized then that free enterprise without a moral base becomes ugly and predatory. Though far from perfect, our free enterprise system is far more humane than it would be if we were living in a culture that had not inherited a strong moral base. Our culture has historically emphasized living life rightly. Recently, however, we have been squandering this moral capital, and we will continue to reap the consequences of this irresponsibility.

Trust and goodwill are essential if an economy is going to work well, and trust and goodwill can only be developed in a society with a strong moral base. The link between morality and economics is therefore very important. We need to understand that if people do not act as moral agents in the economy, the economy, in the long run, will become ever weaker.

Why the Liberal Arts Still Matter

In our time of decentralized political and economic power, the common citizen makes significant decisions regarding solutions to social problems. Therefore it is critical that citizens be prepared to wield this power wisely. Unfortunately, at the same time as economic and political power has become more decentralized, our approach to education has been to adopt a much narrower mission that focuses more and more on vocational training.

The kind of education that prepared aristocrats to exercise their economic and political power is the kind of education that we need today. Our citizens need sound learning skills that allow them to make sense, if only at an elementary level, of the complex problems that modern society presents. They need a good understanding of the big picture that allows them to see problems in their broader context. They also need to learn what it means to be human with its associated values and moral strictures. Without the perspective that this background provides, it is too easy to fall into thinking economics is about money or science is about technology.

Liberal arts education does not replace specialized training or education. We need to develop expertise, but that expertise needs to be built on a foundation of a broad base of knowledge. Without it to temper their thinking, experts will consistently misdiagnose the problems they are trying to solve.

Liberal Arts education is no panacea. The root problem of man is his rebelliousness against God. No education can cure this. Only an act of God and a decision in the soul of each individual can cure this. But a liberal arts education, if it is worthy of the name, prepares a person to understand the human problem and the solution that the gospel presents. In this sense, liberal arts education is, or at least should be, evangelistic.

I admit to being an idealist. Anyone who works to found a great books college in our time has to have a measure of idealism. But I have not totally lost track of reality. I am not advocating that everyone institute liberal arts education. Our society would not accept such a move. But I do urge everyone involved in education to pursue their vocation more “liberal artistically”: encourage students to develop good reading, reasoning, and writing skills; encourage students to work to build a sound, comprehensive, and coherent worldview; and encourage students to understand what it means to be a human being who lives his life before a righteous God. Anyone who teaches students in any capacity can do these things, and the benefits would be huge. If we do not soon rediscover that education is about learning how to live wisely, we will have spent all of our culture’s moral capital and find ourselves in our own wasteland.

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