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Liberal Education (An Overview)

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Liberal Education (An Overview)

Abstract

Book Summary: Education is a field sometimes beset by theories-of-the-day and with easy panaceas that overpromise the degree to which they can alleviate pressing educational problems. The two-volume Encyclopedia of Educational Theory and Philosophy introduces readers to theories that have stood the test of time and those that have provided the historical foundation for the best of contemporary educational theory and practice. Drawing together a team of international scholars, this invaluable reference examines the global landscape of all the key theories and the theorists behind them and presents them in the context needed to understand their strengths and weaknesses. In addition to interpretations of long-established theories, this work offers essays on cutting-edge research and concise, to-the-point definitions of key concepts, ideas, schools, and figures.

Chapter Summary: Liberal education comprises a tradition of educational theory and practice that connects the intrinsic value of learning with the aim of living a cultures and flourishing life. First articulated by educators in ancient Greece and Rome, liberal education has been prominent and often dominant in Western schooling through the centuries. It has evolved from a type of education prescribed for male aristocrats to one that is frequently seen as fundamental, even essential, for everyone - and especially for responsible, democratic citizens. Despite its record as a wellspring of intellectual life and culture, both its meaning and its value have frequently been disputed; its history displays competing interpretations, a cluster of rationales, evolving curricula and pedagogy, and a diversity of educational programs mounted by a succession of institutional forms. After identifying potential conceptual confusions, this entry discusses various conceptions and criticisms of liberal education. [excerpt]

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In 1986, in *Beistle School District No. 403 v. Fraser*, the Supreme Court allowed a school to prohibit the use of offensive and lewd indecent words in a student's speech during assemblies. Two years later, in *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier*, the Court drew a distinction between independent and school-sponsored speech. Independent student speech may only be regulated in accordance with the *Tinker test* (*Tinker v. Des Moines* 1969), allows schools to punish teachers for speaking on matters of public concern when the disruption caused by the speech outweighs the importance of the speech as public discourse.

A large number of cases have concluded that when they are not at school or on duty, teachers generally have the right to engage in noncriminal behavior as they see fit even if the community or school board disapproves. The major exception is that school boards may punish teachers for out-of-school behaviors that have a significant negative effect on their ability to do their job. Courts have consistently held that teachers should be able to refuse to do their job if they believe the school is not providing a safe learning environment.

In 1973, *Goss v. Lopez*, the Supreme Court ruled that students have a right under the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to a hearing before being suspended from school. At the same time, the Court ruled that students would not be unduly burdened if they had to provide a hearing for all school-based suspensions or if every short suspension required a formal process that included lawyers and presentation of evidence by both sides. Thus, the Court decided that for suspensions of 10 days or less, the school need only inform the student of the reasons for the suspension and provide the student with an opportunity to explain what happened.

In 1967, in *Keyishian v. Board of Regents*, the Supreme Court ruled that the constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech protects a teacher's right to be a member of a political organization that opposes the government. One year later, in *Pickering v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court found that teachers have a free-speech right to speak out on matters of public concern and to criticize the policies and actions of their school board. A number of subsequent cases have placed some limits on teacher speech that directly concerns or has a direct effect on the school. The most significant of these cases, *Consortium v. Kamehameha* (1983), allows schools to punish teachers for speaking on matters of public concern when the disruption caused by the speech outweighs the importance of the speech as public discourse.

Michael Imber

See also Affirmative Action; Children's Rights; Equality of Educational Opportunity; Ethnicity and Race; Quality of Education; Right to an Education; Rights: Children, Parents, and Community

Further Readings


**LIBERAL EDUCATION: OVERVIEW**

Liberal education comprises a tradition of educational theory and practice that connects the intrinsic value of learning with the aim of living a cultured and flourishing life. First articulated by educators in ancient Greece and Rome, liberal education has been prominent and often dominant in Western schooling through the centuries. It has evolved from a medieval education prescribed for male aristocrats to one that is frequently seen as fundamental, even essential, for everyone—and especially for responsible, democratic citizens. Despite its record as a wellspring of intellectual life and culture, both its meaning and its value have frequently been disputed; its history displays competing interpretations, a cluster of rationales, evolving curricula and pedagogy, and a diversity of educational programs mounted by a spectrum of institutional forms. After identifying potential conceptual confusions, this entry discusses various conceptions and criticisms of liberal education.

**Liberal Education as a Type of Education**

Theorists who seek to explicate education tout court often end up articulating a conception that closely resembles or features liberal education: Educational literature, both scholarly and popular, is often written with liberal education implicitly in mind. Advocacy, and because it has such holistic goals and broad educational focus: a good life, one's life as a whole. It is also a common temptation for theorists to blur the descriptive and normative analyses of a particular educational orientation in the judgment of good education into the very concept of liberal education and its instantiations precludes evaluative judgments, and it is fallacious to assume that an education focused on the good life is necessarily a good education. Nor is it conceptually precise to confound liberal education with general education—a term that refers either to the nonspecialized portion of a degree program (which is usually intended to preserve some experience of liberal education) or to learning that is foundational to more specialized studies.

The elusive distinctiveness of liberal education is commonly denoted in contrast with other forms of education, such as vocational, religious, or professional education—and also with all varieties of training. In specifying what it is, rather than what it is not, however, educators have located the distinctive and definitive element of liberal education—what makes an education liberal—variously in its scope and aims, in its curricular content, in its pedagogy, and in its institutional forms.

**Scope and Aims**

The term liberal is not in this context a reference to the political viewpoint of contemporary liberalism; rather, it invokes the Latin word liber, meaning “free.” Even in the ancient world, the association with freedom was dual. From the viewpoint of educators, it designated the education that was suitable for those who are free (not enslaved), who have civic responsibilities, and who enjoy the leisure time to pursue activities of intrinsic value—typically men of property. From the viewpoint of the learner, it was characterized as learning that liberates the mind or soul, freeing the student from many forms of ignorance and prejudice. Both interpretations point toward the ultimate goal of living a good life, a life in which one may flourish.

Liberal education, it is claimed, provides the chief means to or expresses the good life—or perhaps entails activities that constitute the good life. Different conceptions of the good in a “good life,” with different balances of intellectual and moral content, have led to further specifications of the aim of liberal education. These have included the transmission of cultural heritage and the cultivation of the life of the mind, self-actualization as the development of both competence and character, the understanding of experiences of a good life of the world and the place of humanity within it, the preparation for informed and responsible citizenship and social service, and the acquisition of complex skills of learning and thinking—critical thinking, information literacy in multiple formats, moral reasoning, and effective communication,
for example—which, along with a commitment to lifelong learning, enhance personal effectiveness. In all these apparently varying specifications, liberal education remains distinctive in connecting them with the concern for the good life and thus having a broader scope and different aims from other forms of education.

The classic statement of the aims of liberal education, or at least the most influential and provocative in recent centuries, is Henry Newman's *The Idea of a University* (1852). In its collected essays, Newman argues that liberal education is the purpose of a university, by which he means an education that cultivates the mind, that values learning for its own sake, and that is “philosophical” in presenting "a comprehensive view of truth in all its branches." Such an education reveals the unity of knowledge (reflected in the term university). Newman's account is, however, decidedly Victorian in both its claims and assumptions—such as its exclusive educational focus on "gentlemen" and acknowledging the production of "good members of society" as its single, reluctant concession to "practical" ends.

**Curriculum**

Another historically grounded approach is to characterize liberal education in terms of its distinctive curriculum: an education in the liberal arts. The Latin term *artes liberales* was employed by classical authors as a name for an ethos and a society, neither of which had ever been included in the Greek list, were dropped thereafter. The remaining seven were eventually organized into two divisions: the methods studies of the *trivium*, including logic, grammar, and rhetoric; and the three quantitative studies of the *quadrivium*, including arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. "Music" here (from the Greek *mousikē*) embraces those studies inspired by the Muses—roughly, the humanities and fine arts. This curriculum was ultimately completed by the capstone study of philosophy (dialectic or philosophical theology), which was seen as the quintessential liberal art. A chief architect of this scheme was Martianus Capella, who codified this list in his elaborately allegorical work, *De nuptiis philosophiae et Mercurii* (written between 410 and 429 CE). It portrayed the marriage of eloquence and wisdom, celebrating in the groom's gifts of the seven liberal arts. This odd, allusive work was enormously influential, defining the liberal arts and inspiring its iconography for seven centuries, from the Middle Ages until the 12th-century stirrings of the Renaissance.

The rediscovery of ancient texts that energized the Renaissance stimulated a shift in prescribed curricular content. Scholars used the term *studia humanitatis* to describe the study of the human sciences, the text-based study of the "humanities" was given special emphasis as the core of liberal education.

From the Enlightenment to the present day, rapid changes in the scope and structure of liberal education have altered the curriculum. Natural philosophy spawned scientific disciplines—physics, chemistry, biology, and geology—as integral, empirical fields. In the 19th century, the social sciences (economics, sociology, and anthropology) along with psychology emerged from philosophy to become distinct disciplines. All claimed a place within liberal education; they could not be ignored in an education that aimed at a comprehensive understanding of the world and the human condition. Such scientific disciplines would of course present a challenge to a curriculum largely devoted to the study of classical humanities. During the same period, moreover, there arose internal challenges to the curricular mandate of classical texts and the requisite study of Latin and Greek. The humanities were modernized to include literature, philosophy, and history originally written in vernacular languages and focused on more recent periods.

In the 20th century, disciplines morphed in method, exploded in content, multiplied further, split into subdisciplines, and blended in interdisciplinary fields of study. In addition, where the content had been Eurocentric, it expanded to include the languages and cultures of other areas of the globe, as well as peoples previously marginalized within Western cultures. The traditional focus of study on artifacts of "high" culture was widened to include "popular" culture as well.

The impact of these developments produced two deep problems for the liberal education curriculum. The first was that the fissure between the humanities and the sciences, along with the sheer profusion of fields, challenged (pace Newman) the long-standing belief in the unity of knowledge. "Arts and sciences," a clarifying term with increasing popularity, suggested both inclusion and division. The second was that, as the diversity and scope of knowledge exceeded reasonable curricular bounds, the touchstone of curricular comprehensiveness had to be replaced by a principle of selection. "Degrees in course," in which all enrolled students were taught the same sequenced content, were replaced by programs that permitted alternative choices for elective and specialization.

As this brief sketch of curricular evolution suggests, it is problematic to define "liberal education" as study of a particular list of liberal arts disciplines. The growth and struggle to curricular content we have sought farther ground from two other sources: a treasury of endowed cultural artifacts or deeper epistemic structures that underlie the disciplines. Those elected to the gods of the humanities, and among them those who themselves bring the humanistic emphasis, move to greater particularity; they identify the content of liberal education with a set of masterworks endowed with cultural meaning: the great texts and masterpieces of art that form the canon. The standard of "greatness" may imply a universality of theme, illumination of the human condition, virtuosity of execution, extent of cultural influence or currency, or inherent value. Robert Martyr (1929-1931) proclaimed the "canon" value of this Great Books curriculum from his perch as president and then chancellor of the University of Chicago. Like-minded colleagues spread the Great Books idea throughout the United States: Scott Buchanan and Stringfield Barr shaped the identity of St. John's College (Annapolis, Maryland) through the establishment of an undergraduate program based entirely on the reading of Western classics; Mortimer J. Adler produced *The Road to实效*, and even a foundation to promote such programs. The British thinker, Michael Oakeshott, memorably described such an education as participation in the inherited conversazione of mankind. Theorists may become even more specific and identify the proper curricular content as that set of memes essential for participating effectively in contemporary culture. But this movement to a curricular essentialism that specifies requisite texts or memes for cultural literacy carries notewor-
for example—which, along with a commitment to lifelong learning, enhance personal effectiveness. In all these apparently varying specifications, liberal education remains distinctive in connecting them with the concern for the good life and thus having a broader scope and different aims from other forms of education.

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Curriculum

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From the Enlightenment to the present day, rapid changes in the scope and knowledge that have altered the curriculum. Natural philosophy spawned scientific disciplines—physics, chemistry, biology, and geology—as integral, empirical fields. In the 19th century, the social sciences (economics, sociology, and anthropology) along with psychology emerged from philosophy to become distinct disciplines. All claimed a place within liberal education; they could not be ignored in an education that aimed at a comprehensive understanding of the world and the human condition. Such scientific disciplines would of course present a challenge to a curriculum largely devoted to the study of classical humanities. During the same period, moreover, there arose internal challenges to the curricular mandate of classical texts and the requisite study of Latin and Greek. The humanities were modernized to include literature, philosophy, and history originally written in vernacular languages and focused on more recent periods. In the 20th century, disciplines morphed in method, explored in content, multiplied further, split into subdisciplines, and blended in interdisciplinary fields of study. In addition, where the content had been Eurocentric, it expanded to include the languages and cultures of other areas of the globe, as well as peoples previously marginalized within Western cultures. The traditional focus of study on artifacts of "high" culture was widened to include "popular" culture as well.

The impact of these developments produced two deep problems for the liberal education curriculum. The first was that the fissure between the humanities and the sciences, along with the sheer profusion of fields, challenged (pace Newman) the long-standing belief in the unity of knowledge. "Arts and sciences," a clarifying term with increasing popularity, suggested both inclusion and division. The second was that, as the diversity and scope of knowledge exceeded reasonable curricular bounds, the touchstone of curricular comprehensiveness had to be replaced by a principle of selection. "Degrees in course," in which all enrolled students were taught the same sequenced content, were replaced by programs that permitted alternative choices for elective and specialization.

As this brief sketch of curricular evolution suggests, it is problematic to define "liberal education" as study of a particular list of liberal arts disciplines. Typically, a *curriculum* is a plan of study for a particular course of study. The term has been used by educators to mean the inclusion of new fields of study, or the exclusion of certain fields from the curriculum, or the development of new approaches to teaching and learning. In this context, the term *curriculum* can be seen as synonymous with *pedagogy*.

Books idea throughout the United States: Scott Buchanan and Stringfellow Barr shaped the identity of St. John's College (Annapolis, Maryland) through the establishment of an undergraduate program based entirely on the reading of Western classics. Mortimer J. Adler proposed a multipronged effort to encourage all citizens to engage with classic texts—study guides, group reading programs, inexpensive editions of canonical texts, comprehensive curricula (e.g., the Paideia Program), and even a foundation to promote such programs. The British thinker, Michael Oakeshott, memorably described such an education as participation in the inherited conversational context of a human being. Theories may express a more general and specific identity of the liberal arts culture as that set of features essential for participating effectively in contemporary culture. But this movement to a curricular essentialism that specifies required texts or subjects for cultural literacy carries enormous risks of parochial vision, subjective bias, and presumptuous cultural hegemony. Alternatively, theorists may locate the content of liberal education to its various structures that undergird the disciplines. Such structures might be theorized, for example, as methods of inquiry, realms of meaning, or a priori structures of knowledge. Thus, a liberal education might require an understanding of the methods of science, for example, rather than the study of specific scientific disciplines or memes; it might require humanistic study, but not necessarily English history or the plays of Shakespeare.

Contemporary liberal education typically involves the following:

1. Required selective breadth of study distributed across forms of knowledge or linked to broad learning goals
2. The choice of a field for study in depth—the major
3. Elective studies
4. An array of experiential educational activities, such as service learning, internships, study abroad, research collaborations, and purposeful cocurricular activities

Pedagogy

Some educators prefer to call an education "liberal," if it employs certain techniques. In this way, a liberal education is less about what is taught and more about how it is taught; one might therefore claim that a subject like accounting is
appropriately part of a liberal education provided it is taught "liberally." But explicating just what it means to teach liberally is difficult. First, teaching methods change, so one must comprehend this evolution in any account of that is meant to transcend the methods of the moment. Second, there are several levels at which one could locate a distinctive pedagogy: from the reliance on specific teaching techniques to the fundamental assumptions and values manifested in teaching. For example, liberal education is often identified with the technique of Socratic dialogue, the give-and-take of proposal and critique in a conversation aimed at clarifying and deepening the understanding of given concepts. But one could speak of the broader notion of teaching "liberally" as the sort of teaching that routinely requires students to go beyond remembering and comprehending to engage in "higher" activities such as evaluating, analyzing, integrating, and synthesizing or creating content. Finally, one may offer a holistic account of liberal pedagogy, describing it, for example, as teaching that respects the student's autonomy and critical faculties. This pedagogy the love of learning. Liberal education typically refers to "the larger picture" of personal, social, and moral implications.

Critiques and Contemporary Issues

One popular genre of criticism faults current practice as failing to live up to the ideals of liberal education. Allan Bloom—philosopher, classicist, and author—describes education in a "Great Books" curriculum—virtually defined the genre in his widely read jeremiad, The Closing of the American Mind (1987), which has spawned scores of imitations and parodies. Depending on the conception of liberal education endorsed by the author, these critiques may diagnose the causes of decline as curricular dilution and incoherence, technology or programmatic distractions to learning, subversive student culture, the adoption of computers or utilitarian values, faculty incursion to teaching, overspecialization, the research ethos, the failure to connect with human lives or to pose "big questions," or other alleged degenerations. Another genre of critiques targets the ideal of liberal education itself. The charges include perennial allegations that liberal education is essentially impractical and remote from the genuine issues of life, elite in practice and aristocratic in values, inappropriately academic as the required core of schooling, and resistant to assessment of its claims. Postmodern critics have added charges that liberal education is excessively rationalistic; indifferent to emotions, relationships, and family and professional responsibilities; and that it is a lofty ideal that masks sexism, elitism, and cultural imperialism: that anachronistically presumes a common culture. Such critiques, however, are usually directed, implicitly or explicitly, toward particular conceptions of liberal education.

Today, a declining portion of degrees earned in higher education are in the liberal arts; many professional schools have pronounced liberal education to be in peril. Yet it survives, is periodically renewed, and often thrives in many secondary schools in small, independent liberal arts colleges; in designated public liberal arts universities; in the arts and sciences divisions (or "university colleges") of many research universities; and in the resurgent education of institutions of newly reunited liberally countries around the world.

Daniel R. DeNicola

See also Adler, Mortimer, and the Paideia Program; Cultural Literacy and Core Knowledge Skills; Education and潘多拉萨 - "the "Core Values" and the "Toms" Approach; Knowledge, Structure of: From Aristotle to Bruner and Hirst; Liberalism; Oaksheott, Michael.

Further Readings


Liberalism

The meaning of liberalism, conveyed immediately by the word itself, involves a political philosophy centrally devoted to the idea that each with any grand political philosophy, however, the meaning of liberalism is deeply contested, so much so that it is perhaps easier to speak of varieties of liberalism rather than liberalism as such: classical and modern liberalism, comprehensive and political liberalism, neoliberalism, libertarianism, welfare liberalism, and so on.

John Locke, Adam Smith, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John Mill, John Dewey, Isaiah Berlin, John Rawls, and Jürgen Habermas all are exponents of liberalism, but in their work can be found different interpretations of liberty, yielding different understandings of the boundary between the public and the private domains, the role and nature of education, the appropriate scope of toleration, and the conditions of legitimate state power. This entry examines the essential characteristics of any liberal philosophy, noting where differences in interpreting core concepts lead to different varieties of liberalism.

However, it is important to stress at the outset that the educational challenges presented by the various kinds of liberal philosophy as described above are daunting and indeed are hotly contested—which perhaps explains why the literature focusing on liberalism in philosophy of education has been rapidly growing for several decades. Thus, among the questions addressed are the following: Should autonomy be cultivated in children, and if so, how? What civic virtues and skills are necessary, and what role ought the schoolhouse play in fostering them? Do parents have the right to control the nature of the education of their children, whether in homeschooling or in private or public schools? How is equality of educational opportunity to be understood, and how is it that ideal to be related to the liberty interests of parents and communities to construct educational opportunities for their children? Do communities or cultural groups have rights that, in educational contexts, outweigh the freedom of children to be self-determining? What rights in determining the nature of education are possessed by the state? What conditions need to be provided so that individuals become equal as citizens and are able to exercise their individual freedoms?

Preliminary Observations

At its most basic, liberalism describes a political philosophy in which liberty or freedom of the individual is central. Individual liberty is taken to be a default position, a starting presumption, and restrictions on liberty, especially those imposed by the state through coercive means, stand in need of justification. The foundational role of individual liberty delivers a limited government or restrained state that respects human conscience and religious diversity and that, in Jefferson's famous words, "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The educational implications are nontrivial.

Historically, liberalism arose during the Enlightenment, when the failures of many social orders—the divine right of kings and aristocratic privilege—were challenged and eventually uprooted in the American and French Revolutions. The first systematic expression of a liberal political philosophy can be found in the 17th-century philosopher Locke, who developed in his Two Treatises of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration (Locke, 1689/2003), the idea of legitimate political authority emerging from individuals in a state of nature who consent to be governed. Liberalism has since been associated with social contract theories of government, in which the legitimacy of government depends on the consent of the governed. Though school choice is a liberal policy, the claim that liberalism has some roots in antiquity, it is quintessentially a modern political philosophy.

Liberalism as a political ideology must not be confused with the frequent invocation of the term in ordinary politics, in which liberals are contrasted with conservatives, and where liberalism is a mark of political praiseworthy or condemnation. We may sensi-
appropriate part of a liberal education provided it is taught "liberally."

But explicating just what it means to teach liberal education is difficult. First, teaching methods change, so one must comprehend this evolution in any attempt that is meant to discern the methods of the moment. Second, there are several levels at which one could locate a distinctive pedagogy: from the reliance on specific teaching techniques to the fundamental assumptions and values manifested in the teaching. For example, liberal education is often identified with the technique of Socratic dialogue, the give-and-take of proposal and critique in a conversation aimed at clarifying and deepening the understanding of central concepts. But it could apply broadly to teaching "liberally" as the sort of teaching that routinely requires students to go beyond remembering and comprehending to engage in "higher" activities such as evaluating, analyzing, integrating, and synthesizing or creating content. Finally, one may offer a holistic account of liberal pedagogy, describing it, for example, as teaching that respects the student's autonomy and critical faculties. This applies to the more general meaning of liberal education. The word "liberal" commonly refers to "the larger picture" of personal, social, and moral implications.

Critiques and Contemporary Issues

One popular genre of criticism faults current practice as failing to live up to the ideals of liberal education. Allan Bloom—philosopher, classicist, and author of the influential "Great Books" curriculum—virtually defined the genre in his widely read jeremiad, The Closing of the American Mind (1987), which has spawned scores of imitations and refutations. Depending on the conception of liberal education endorsed by the author, these critiques may diagnose the causes of decline as curricular dilution and incoherence, technology or programmatic distractions to learning, subversive student culture, the adoption of corrupt or utilitarian values, faculty inattentiveness to teaching, over-specialization, the research ethos, the failure to connect with human lives or to pose "big questions," or other alleged degradations.

Another genre of critiques targets the ideal of liberal education itself. The charges include perennial allegations that liberal education is essentially impractical and remote from the genuine issues of life, static in practice and aristocratic in values, inappropriately academic as the required core of schooling, and resistant to assessment of its claims. Postmodern critics have added charges that liberal education is excessively rationalistic; indifferent to emotions, relationships, and family and professional responsibilities; and that it is a lofty ideal that masks sexism, elitism, and cultural imperialism that anachronistically presumes a common culture. Such critiques, however, are usually directed, implicitly or explicitly, toward particular conceptions of liberal education.

Today, a declining portion of degrees earned in higher education are in the liberal arts; many programs have pronounced liberal education to be in peril. Yet it survives, is periodically renewed, and often thrives in many secondary schools. In small, independent liberal arts colleges; in designated public liberal arts universities; in the arts and sciences divisions (or "university colleges") of many research universities; and in the resurgence of educational institutions of numerous recently liberalized countries around the world.

Daniel R. DeNicola

See also Adler, Mortimer, and the Paideia Program; Cultural Literacy and Core KnowledgeSkills; Education, American; Essentials of the Conservative Case; Epistemology, Liberalism; Rations, Anthropological; and the "Temple Approach; Knowledge, Structure of: From Aristotle to Brumber and Hirst; Liberalism; Oakshott, Michael

Further Readings


LIBERALISM

The meaning of liberalism, conveyed immediately by the term itself, involves a political philosophy centrally devoted to the proposition: With any grand political philosophy, however, the meaning of liberalism is deeply contested. It is not simply a matter of taste. The meaning of liberalism is deeply contested, so much so that it is perhaps easier to speak of varieties of liberalism rather than liberalism as such: classical and modern liberalism, comprehensive and political liberalism, neoliberalism, libertarianism, welfare liberalism, and so on.

John Locke, Adam Smith, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Montesquieu, John Dewey, Isaiah Berlin, John Rawls, and Jurgen Habermas all are exponents of liberalism, but in their work can be found different interpretations of liberty, yielding different understandings of the boundary between the public and the private domains, the role and nature of education, the appropriate scope of toleration, and the conditions of legitimate state power.

This entry examines the essential characteristics of any liberal political philosophy, noting where differences in interpreting core concepts lead to different varieties of liberalism.

However, it is important to stress at the outset that the educational challenges presented by the various facets of liberalism that are described below are daunting and indeed are hotly contested—which perhaps explains why the literature focusing on liberalism in philosophy of education has been rapidly growing for several decades. Thus, among the questions addressed are the following: Should autonomy be cultivated in children, and if so, how? What civic virtues and skills are necessary, and what role ought the schoolhouse play in fostering them? Do parents have the right to control the nature of the education of their children, whether in homeschooling or in private or public schools? How is equality of educational opportunity to be understood, and how is that ideal to be related to the liberty interests of parents and communities to construct educational opportunities for their children? Do communities or cultural groups have rights that, in educational contexts, outweigh the freedom of children to be self-determining? What rights in determining the nature of education are possessed by the state? What conditions need to be provided so that individuals become equal as citizens and are able to exercise their individual freedoms?

Preliminary Observations

At its most basic, liberalism describes a political philosophy in which liberty or freedom of the individual is central. Individual liberty is taken to be a default position, a starting presumption, and restrictions on liberty, especially those imposed by the state through coercive means, stand in need of justification. The foundational role of individual liberty delivers a limited government or restrained state that respects human conscience and religious diversity and that, in Jefferson's famous words, "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The educational implications are nontrivial.

Historically, liberalism arose during the Enlightenment, when the building blocks of many social orders—the divine right of kings and aristocratic privilege—were challenged and eventually uprooted in the American and French Revolutions. The first systematic expression of a liberal political philosophy can be found in the 17th-century philosopher Locke, who developed in his Two Treatises of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration (Locke, 1689/2003), the idea of legitimacy of government emerging from individuals in a state of nature who consent to be governed. Liberalism has since been associated with social contract theories of government, in which the legitimacy of government depends on the consent of the governed. Thomas Hobbes argued that liberalism has some roots in antiquity, it is quintessentially a modern political philosophy.

Liberalism as a political ideology must not be confused with the frequent invocation of the term in ordinary politics, in which liberals are contrasted with conservatives, and where liberalism is a mark of political praise or condemnation. We may sensibly talk about liberals occupying space on the left and conservatives on the right of a political spectrum, but in many countries, both liberals and conservatives embrace liberalism as a political ideology. Most democracies today can be described as liberal democracies, committed to individual liberty, limited