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## Liberal Education and Moral Education

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# Liberal Education and Moral Education

## **Abstract**

Mark Van Doren, the noted literary scholar, once remarked, "The college is meaningless without a curriculum, but it is more so when it has one that is meaningless." Many current critics of undergraduate curricula in America assent to the crucial need for programmatic renewal in our colleges and universities. They bemoan the cookie-cutter sameness in far too many of them. The oddity is that U.S. colleges have long touted their "diversity" while largely holding fast to rather traditional pathways. This illuminating volume goes beyond formulaic nuts-and-bolts recipes for constructing curriculum: it seeks to interpret and analyze the contemporary landscape of college curriculum. Yet it also hopes to heighten pedagogic horizons in more imaginative, innovative ways by presenting actual curricula from more distinctive academic offerings. This book will stimulate vitally needed "out-of-the-box" thinking about curricula among faculty, administrators, and students, and ultimately invite the emergence of more radically diverse visions and realities for today's college curriculum. *-From the publisher*

## **Keywords**

secondary education, liberal arts education, college, university

## **Disciplines**

Curriculum and Social Inquiry | Educational Methods | Liberal Studies | Philosophy

## **Comments**

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## CHAPTER THREE

# Liberal Education and Moral Education

DANIEL R. DENICOLA

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My intent is to advance two claims: the first is that liberal education entails moral education; the second is that moral education must ultimately engage liberal learning. These two assertions may be regarded simply as descriptive: so, for example, the first claim may be read as “*any* liberal education entails *some sort of* moral education,” which wouldn’t imply that the entailed moral education is adequate or proper, let alone optimal—it might in fact be objectionable. But these claims may also be taken normatively: the first proposition would then be read, for example, as “an *excellent* liberal education entails a *sound* moral education.” I mean to assert these claims in the stronger, normative sense. This is *not* to say that the two forms of education are identical (I will claim they are not); and I certainly do not contend that one must have a liberal arts degree to be a moral person.<sup>1</sup>

Given the current scene—the barrage of “narratives of decline”<sup>2</sup> regarding liberal education and the “hermeneutics of suspicion”<sup>3</sup> regarding moral education—my claims may seem rather rosy and retro. That is no argument against them, of course, but simply ignoring this climate would be blinkered. Clearly, I have some explaining to do.

### Critiques of Liberal Education

There are two sorts of critiques of liberal education, both of which have made publishers happy since at least the 1980s; together they have created a discouraging miasma. The first sort focuses on performance gaps. Now any normative practice, especially one that is complex and institutionalized, frequently displays regrettable performance gaps; my view is not so rosy as to claim that liberal education is a flawless exception. (Alas! Not even John Dewey’s assault on the theory/practice dichotomy has made it possible to elicit and assure excellent practice

just by articulating sound theory.) Pointing out such failures, degradations, and corruptions of practice is, however, a call to mend, correct, and reform, not a strike against liberal learning itself (just as deploring the problems in our criminal justice system would not *per se* discredit the ideal of justice). On the contrary, to decry a performance gap is often to *endorse* the value of the ideal. The jeremiads that fall into this category, however, typically bemoan *widespread* and *systemic* degradation of performance, and they often elevate a *particular* conception of liberal education as the salvational ideal.<sup>4</sup> I usually find myself reluctant to embrace such friends of liberal learning, because I often disagree with their characterization or the alleged scope of the claimed decadence, or with the conception of liberal education they advocate as redemptive—or with all three.

The second sort of critique is more worrisome, because it argues that the very ideal of liberal education itself is problematic.<sup>5</sup> Those critics in this group who go on to offer constructive proposals advocate a spectrum of changes that ranges from significant supplement to radical reform to the outright replacement of liberal education with a distinctly different paradigm. Such vigorous lines of criticism come from many directions, but although aimed truly, most of them seem to me to miss the mark. Given my goals for this essay, it is impossible to address even the most cogent of these critiques in deserved detail; instead, I will describe three generic ways such critiques fall short and hope that these adumbrations will intimate the outline of a fuller, more adequate response.

1. Critics frequently take (or mistake) a particular conception for the concept<sup>6</sup>: they find fault with an influential conception of liberal education (say, that of John Henry Cardinal Newman or Robert Hutchins), or with a particular historical institutionalization (say, the Victorian university or the modern research university), and then conclude expansively that the concept of liberal education is thereby on the ropes. It is as though one were to criticize the theories of justice developed by Aristotle and Rawls and summarily conclude that the concept of justice itself is defective. To use a biological analogy, this mistakes the phenotype for the genotype.<sup>7</sup> If it is wrong to equate the concept of liberal education with one of its iterations, it is also egregious to reduce it to a specific curriculum or pedagogy—or even to a theory of curriculum or pedagogy. Liberal education is more than the trivium and quadrivium, Oxbridge tutorials, or the Great Books Program. How then do we get at the ideal itself? My preference is, in fact, not to construe liberal education as an abstract ideal, which would ignore or problematize its dynamism, but rather to understand it as a tradition that remains interactive and open. Liberal education comprises a rich, complex, and live tradition of educational theory and practice, traceable to the classical cultures of Greece and Rome; it has evolved over the ages in mutual cause-effect interactions with other aspects of Western cultures—especially socio-political, intellectual, and technological aspects.<sup>8</sup> Responsive to its day, it has had a multitude of interpreters and appeared in varying manifestations, and it has been a dependable and bounteous fount of intellectual life, flowing for centuries as the mainstream in places of higher learning. For my part, at least, it is this venerable and still-evolving tradition that grounds the concept and merits our attention.

2. Perhaps because of the first error, critics are often led to a second: they restrict liberal education to the classroom only—to what is ordained by the teacher—and ignore other aspects of the educational situation. But liberal education is always situational, shaded by place and time, and its educational impact is shaped by a community of learners, a co-curriculum, and an institutional context—as well as by what transpires in classrooms and laboratories. Any ad-

equate theory must comprehend these typical aspects of practice. These elements are not fixed ideals either; they too have particular iterations and change in response to many factors—but they are relevant, even indispensable, to a holistic understanding of liberal education. Recent developments such as the encouragement and expansion of experiential, collaborative, and service learning, should be understood to be as integral to contemporary liberal education as the globalization of the curriculum. (This point is especially salient when considering the ways in which liberal education involves moral education.) Indeed the boundaries of the classroom are increasingly porous as courses become more like twenty-four-hour learning communities, incorporating a variety of experiential modes of learning.

3. Most disturbing, I find many critiques of liberal education to be self-refuting—not in a formal, logical sense, but in an existential sense: a refutation of the self. Most critics of liberal education are drawing upon their own liberal learning—it seems undeniable—to attack the ideal of liberal education; truly, it is their own liberal education that enables the substance, acuity, and eloquence of their complaints—and thereby belies them. More than a disheartening ingratitude, more than a sophisticated self-deception, this amounts to an educated refutation of one's own education, an *alma matricide*.

These quickly sketched responses will have to suffice so that I may return to my present claims. Any argument for my two assertions of strong relations between liberal and moral education crucially turns on what is meant by the two terms. Not only are both terms controversial, but their component terms—"liberal," "moral," and "education"—are individually contested also; indeed, they abide in a thicket of contested concepts. To attempt to clear that thicket would be folly. Rather, by understanding liberal education as a tradition that accommodates various competing conceptions (and later, of moral education as a range of practices), I will accept its contested status as natural or appropriate, give due regard to context, and interpret many controversies over meaning as internal to the tradition. Perhaps we can at least tiptoe through the thicket without losing our way.

## Liberal Education and the Good Life

How are we to characterize this durable yet contested tradition, distinguishing it from other forms of education? And why does it entail moral education? I prefer the Aristotelian approach: let's look to its aims.

Liberal education is distinctive in having as its supreme purpose *the discernment of and preparation for the good life*. It is, therefore, both descriptively, and in its aspirations, fundamentally, a moral education. The "breadth" so often associated with liberal education is not, in the first instance, breadth of content (*that* is derivative); rather it is the breadth of its normative concern: the activity of living as a human being and one's life as a whole. Insofar as the pursuit of a liberal education is an intentional action, its purpose is transformative; that is, it is an action intended to improve the agent *as an agent*. These are quite different aims from those of, say, vocational, military, or professional education.

There are some who will interrupt at this early point to declare that, performance gaps aside, such an education is not *normatively* moral, that what it provides is a *deficient* or *misguided* moral education. The so-called "good life," they might say, reeks of an elitist, aristocratic life; or, it is an impractical and arid intellectualist existence, without passion or the warmth of caring relationships; or, it is presented as *the* good life—a single, homogeneous, hegemonic,

sexist vision of what life should be; or, it presumes not only the moral authority of the educators, but the righteousness of their teachings and methods.<sup>9</sup> Some of these arguments, and others like them, are compelling when applied to some versions of liberal education—indeed, all of them are probably apt critiques of a few versions—but they do not engage the underlying and fundamental ideas that have inspired the tradition. To explain why, I need to refine the three key terms in my account. First, the guiding phrase, “the good life,” need not designate a singular, pre-existing ideal; there is no reason why, in principle, we might not anticipate diverse, individual, and contrasting visions of the good life (having correlative implications for educational content). Second, the learner’s effort to lay claim to such a vision and to understand what it requires, for which I have used the term “discernment,” is an intrinsic part of liberal learning; and the vision thus claimed is both found and formulated, always open-ended, and under continual refinement. Third, my word “preparation” might wrongly imply that the good life commences when learning ends; rather, living and learning come to permeate and cultivate each other throughout a lifetime. Thus refined, the unfolded and explicit (but infelicitous) statement of liberal education’s aim would become: *the continual discernment and (re-)synthesis of, as well as commitment to, preparation for, and cultivation of, a flourishing and moral life*. So understood, we might have conceptions of liberal education that are democratic rather than aristocratic; that require the cultivation of emotions and personal relationships as well as intellect; that include experiential learning and encourage practical engagement; that are gender sensitive and culturally pluralistic; that are alert to issues of race and class; and that avoid morally egregious indoctrination. (In fact, these very possibilities are prominent among contemporary trends in liberal education.) Indeed the ultimate concerns of liberal education are not confined to situations of privilege and comfort; concern for one’s life and its best prospects arise amidst poverty, in despair, when shining ideals of the good life are shattered—even after great horror.<sup>10</sup>

How does one come to understand what a flourishing and fulfilled life—a good life—is? And how does one prepare for such a life? It is natural that different approaches to these questions would develop in the tradition, strands of thought that express a vision of liberal education, each interpreting the supreme aim, each initially quite expansive but letting loose a cascade of conceptions and ideas in increasing specificity reaching from goals to curriculum and pedagogy.<sup>11</sup> Four such strands, which may be identified by their announced educational aim, are dominant and intertwined in the tradition. The four I have in mind are:

1. *Education is for the transmission of cultural inheritance across generations.*
2. *Education is for self-actualization, leading to a normative individuality.*
3. *Education is for understanding the world and the forces that shape one’s life.*
4. *Education is for engagement with and action in the world.*

These strands represent polarities in the philosophy of education, create forms of educational discourse, and establish perspectives from which theories of curriculum and pedagogy may be developed; they each accommodate clusters of variant conceptions of liberal education. (In fact, they are so capacious that one might easily forget their subsidiary connection to the cultivation of a good life.) All four are detectable in robust conceptions of liberal education (and also in most mission statements of institutions devoted to liberal education), but it is the variation in the weaving of these strands that gives such conceptions (and institutions) their

particular distinctiveness. Indeed, the dynamics of liberal education's history may be ascribed largely to the shifting relationship, balance, and blend of these strands. I will draw abbreviated sketches of them, trusting in their familiarity to suggest something of their larger visions.

1. *Education is for the transmission of cultural inheritance across generations.* Humans are beings born into helplessness and ignorance; parents cannot convey what they have learned through their genes. Learning is imperative for survival, but every generation must start to learn anew. Our ancestors, however, produced two innovations that transformed the possibilities for learning: the development of complex symbol systems to encode experience, and the techniques of preserving these codes in durable artifacts. Thus we are able to articulate, accumulate, and preserve the human experience, creating a legacy of learning that grows with each generation and can be passed along to the next. It is the urgent imperative of education to conserve and bequeath this cultural treasure, our intellectual heritage: sophisticated languages, whole disciplines of knowledge, a profusion of great texts and works of art, historical narratives, and unsolved but intriguing problems—along with the keys to understanding them.<sup>12</sup> The appreciation and assimilation of that legacy (what we have come to call “the canon”) are averred to be indispensable to the aim of discerning and living a good life. This education-as-transmission strain has claimed several well-known moral dimensions: a significant portion of any such cultural legacy is moral in content, explicitly or implicitly; it portrays moral exemplars; it may also stimulate and serve salient moral capacities, such as moral imagination or judgment; more subtly, moral considerations are involved in the evaluation of this heritage, the principles of selection employed, and in the implications conveyed regarding the uses and value of this legacy.

2. *Education is for self-actualization, leading to a normative individuality.* On this view, education is focused on the actualization of valued potentials in the learner, the awakening and development of capacities, dispositions, and skills. This strand draws on a desire for fulfillment or completion and is perfectionist in that it links particular conceptions of the good life to the cultivation and exercise of certain elements of human nature or of individual character (or both), the perfection of oneself in what I am calling “a normative individuality.” The picture of the self-actualized person may be drawn from social mores or roles, from naturalistic indices of well-being and flourishing, or from the unique potential and perceived promise of the individual student (or from a blend of these). Hinting at differing metaphysical commitments, the process itself may be described variously as finding or forming a self; as self-creation, self-definition, self-realization, or self-actualization. But all interpretations presume that liberal learning individuates, that it shapes and fulfills character, and that such an education offers individuals a better version of themselves that would likely be unattainable through simply growing up and older. Thus self-actualization entails moralization.<sup>13</sup>

3. *Education is for understanding the world and the forces that shape one's life.* In this strand, by contrast, the focus is on the actuality of this world and the human predicament. To comprehend our context is to grasp not only the physical world, but also the social, cultural, and psychological factors in play.<sup>14</sup> The prescribed means for understanding the world—the disciplines and techniques of inquiry—vary in different versions, and the list of salient “forces” changes over time. Proponents may even debate to what extent we discover or create the “world” we inhabit; what it is to “dwell” in a world; and what limits there are to our knowledge of our situation. Yet among these versions there is unity in the aim of making sense of things, in the value of wonder or curiosity; achieving understanding is always tied to making the phenomena

meaningful. The assumption in the background is that understanding our world is indispensable to a good life, either in the strong sense that such understanding (and contemplation of the understood world) *is* the good life, or in the weaker (and more common) sense that understanding the world is conducive to or a component of a good life.<sup>15</sup> To know myself and others; to understand my situation and its possibilities; to grasp the risks and consequences of my actions—these all are surely relevant to my moral action. Moreover, the imperative to understand may itself be seen as a moral obligation in the spirit of Alfred North Whitehead’s observation, “Where attainable knowledge could have changed the issue, ignorance has the guilt of vice.”<sup>16</sup>

4. *Education is for engagement with and action in the world.* Liberal education, on this view, may bring us to cope with the world, to serve it nobly, to critique it trenchantly, or to reform it. Under different interpretations of “the world” and our prospects in it, the engagement and action may include civic engagement, public service, moral action, policy analysis (as an aspect of *praxis*), social criticism—even a principled withdrawal from the world. It may seem surprising that I include this strand within liberal education, since the latter is often portrayed as elevating theory and disdaining practice; but as far back as classical Athens, Isocrates—whose school rivaled Plato’s and may be considered a prototype liberal arts institution—sought to prepare students to be wise and active citizens, to train them in dialectic and rhetoric, a power to articulate and persuade grounded in deep and sound moral commitments.<sup>17</sup> Living a good life requires practical wisdom, sound judgment and reflective action; a good community must be constructed and sustained by the continual efforts of virtuous and competent people. Even in those marginal versions that advocate withdrawing from the world’s dizzying arena, education (on this account) is interpreted as readying the student for effective and appropriate moral action.<sup>18</sup>

Through these various strands, the learner confronts primal questions: *Who am I? What may I become? What is our story? What sort of place and situation am I in? What should I do? What may I hope?* Tied to the ultimate concern for living a good life, these four strands, though distinct, are throughout the tradition of liberal education shown to be related *necessarily*: sometimes, one aim is subsumed as means to another’s ends; often the elaboration of one leads to another; and at other times, more than one strand, even all four, are declared boldly as pluralistic ends of equal status—leaving to the learner the task of discovering their relationship. For example, one might see self-actualization as requiring engagement with the world: Aristotle is identified primarily with the educational aim of self-actualization, of developing and exercising virtuous traits in a flourishing or eudaimonistic life; but Aristotle thought such a life was expressed through understanding one’s world (*sophia*, or theoretical wisdom) and engaging in action with virtue (*phronesis*, or practical wisdom).<sup>19</sup> Or, one might see the assimilation of transmitted culture as a path to self-realization: Michael Oakeshott is known for valuing the transmission of culture, interpreting our intellectual heritage in the image of a grand conversation, in which we must “learn the voices”; yet Oakeshott also asserts that entering this conversation, “our common inheritance... is the only way of becoming a human being, and to inhabit it is to be a human being”—expressing thereby an ultimate, motivating hope for self-actualization.<sup>20</sup>

There are, in addition, noteworthy continuities or themes that thread through and bind the strands of liberal education, and that are morally salient. One such theme (reflected in the often misunderstood term “liberal”) is *freedom*.<sup>21</sup> The original terms commonly translated as “liberal arts” (*eleutheriai technai* in Greek, *artes liberales* in Latin), could be rendered equally well as “the skills of freedom.” Liberal education proceeds from and for freedom, and each of



the four strands offers its particular form of liberation: (1) the cultural transmission ideal offers liberation from a timeless, meaningless, unconstructed present; (2) self-actualization offers liberation from confused and imposed identities, liberating one's authentic self in the realization of one's own most possibilities; (3) understanding the world delivers a liberation from superstition, ignorance, and error; and (4) effective engagement in the world yields a liberation from powerlessness, false constraints, and social entropy. Together, they free us (and burden us) to be morally mature persons together.

Related to the theme of *freedom* are the ties to *autonomy* and to *democracy*—all terms with moral bearing. Autonomy, willing and making one's own choices, is enshrined both as a goal of and an ethical constraint on the educational process (indoctrination is condemned as a violation of this constraint). In postmodern times, autonomy is sometimes derided as a relic of the Enlightenment (despite its ancient roots and perennial blossoms), reflecting atomistic individualism and celebrating self-sufficiency—charges that are sometimes apt. But autonomy may also grace the “situated self” when understood in other ways—for example, as what enables the exercise of human capabilities in response to one's situation, or as a condition of moral agency that shapes relationships.<sup>22</sup> Having the capacity to influence one's own life in response to critical reflection may even be essential to the concept of a developed self—situated and related, or not. That there is a link between liberal education and democracy, on the other hand, may seem an odd claim, since one striking historical change in liberal education is its metamorphosis from the classical model of an exclusive education suitable only for leaders—free, aristocratic, leisured men—to the contemporary vision of an education required of all for effective democratic citizenship. But the connection was there at the outset: after all, though citizenship was usually limited to free and propertied males, it was the emergence of democracy and the correlative threat to aristocratic values that provoked consideration of the best education for such citizens and the establishment of competing schools to offer it. Through the fits and starts of a punctuated social evolution, our collective sense of who is capable of and entitled to such citizenship has become increasingly inclusive—and the need for liberal education more widespread. The moral climate of democracy, in which each individual's experience is valued as relevant to the construction of the good, a society in which virtually all adults may shape their own lives—and therefore the lives of others—depends on liberal education for its very survival as well as its thriving. In such a climate, the concern for one's life as a whole and for what it is to live a flourishing life becomes a live issue for all.

Finally, liberal education presents learning as continuous with living, as a *life-long* endeavor. Schooling may end, but the liberal learner is never finished. We learn how to learn because life keeps surprising us, we age and change, and we may grow continually in our ability to derive meaning from experience, reflect critically, and respond wisely. The transformation of liberal learning may be dramatic, but it is never completed: the four strands—individually and together—set infinite tasks.

Let me take stock at this point. I have presented liberal education as a live and evolving tradition, characterized by the dynamism of four interrelated strands of thought, and unified by normative concern for the activity of living as a human being and one's life as a whole. I hope to have shown that in its supreme aim, in the visions of subsidiary strands, in its themes and the questions that motivate its learners, and in its effects, it is a profoundly moral education. It's well past time to turn to my second claim: moral education ultimately and inexorably leads us to liberal learning.

## Moral Education and the Moral Person

Moral education is the range of practices aimed at moralizing individuals and rectifying social arrangements through structured learning.<sup>23</sup> As with educational processes in general, it anticipates hopefully both an individual and a social good: it is good to become a moral person; and a society is better if it is just and composed of moral individuals. We should mark the contrast between incidental and purposeful learning. Learning is inevitable and continuous throughout our lives, although much is learned incidentally—and a good deal of that is below the threshold of our consciousness. But we may also pursue learning purposefully and reflectively; learning in that way requires intention and attention, as well as self-awareness and reflection on experience—though incidental and unnoticed learning always accompanies it as well. Moral *education* implies purposeful and reflective learning.<sup>24</sup> Although humans have evolved neural capacities that enable a moral life and perhaps even preferences or dispositions that tilt or direct our values; and although we develop, mature, and surely acquire some sense of morality through normal socialization, a moral education claims to offer “value-added” outcomes: in other words, moral education “goes beyond” whatever morality is hard-wired in our biology and unfurled by simply growing up human—in fact, it may even resist, redirect, or attempt to undo these presentments.

The content of moral education—the intended “value-added outcomes”—may be derived from theory or from practice (or both). Every moral theory contains an embedded image of the moral person from which the content of a moral education may be drawn. Cultural relativists, for example, seek to develop people who understand and embrace the values of their society—and perhaps display tolerance to the differing judgments of other societies; Kantians strive to produce persons of good will, individuals who have strong reasoning skills, a keen sense of duty, and a profound respect for every human being; and virtues theorists focus on the development of persons who have moral character, interpreted as a configuration of specific traits. These examples are stated roughly, of course, and each may be dilated into ideals of burnished detail, but the point here is simply that different ethical theories impart different models of the moral person—different senses of what is required for moral agency; of what motives, actions, traits, principles, and practices are morally worthy (and unworthy); of what outcomes or relationships or experiences are good—and that these images guide the practices of moral education.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, implicit theoretical models of the ethical community or moral society may yield content for moral education projects of social reform. Frequently, however, the practices of moral education, instead of being drawn from rarified moral theory, are developed from practice, from shared experience or cultural custom. In that case, the programmatic content may be derived from considering such pre-theoretic questions as: *How must we act in order to get along together? What traits and actions are inevitably self-destructive or harmful to others? What is expected of a decent citizen in our society?*<sup>26</sup>

These moral education projects may also have varying levels of aspiration: moral education may take a minimalist approach, aiming modestly at preventing egregious immorality and producing people who are generally decent; or it may be more ambitious, trying to moralize students as far as possible toward *eudaimonia*, supererogation, or some other perfectionist ideal. The primary “value-added outcome” is then one that governs all others: it is the provision of a considered and compelling ideal of moral personhood and a moral community. Yes, this ideal may be more or less implicit and inchoate or explicit and polished, open and pluralistic

or closed and singular, minimal or maximal—but it serves to define the intentionality and structure that make the experience of moral learning a moral *education*.

Typically, moral education will aim to produce the following outcomes, each made specific by the particular model of the moral person it enshrines or its answers to pre-theoretic questions:

1. *The development of morally relevant capacities.* It will seek to awaken and expand the range, sensitivity, and effectiveness of such capacities as, for example, practical reason or judgment, empathy, moral imagination, or the capacity to form caring relationships.

2. *The acquisition of morally relevant skills.* Moral persons are competent in certain morally salient skills, proficiency in which is an aim of moral education—for example, the application of principles to cases, consequentialist reasoning, participation in ethically-structured discourse and deliberation, techniques of values clarification, or skills of nurturance.

3. *The development of moral character.*<sup>27</sup> Moral education nurtures virtuous traits and eliminates vicious or morally dysfunctional traits: for example, to develop honesty, courage, persistence, compassion, or tolerance, as settled dispositions, while reducing patterns of deceptiveness, cowardice, giving up easily, carelessness, or stinginess.

4. *The development of moral agency.* Moral education will try to develop various second-order traits relevant to moral agency, metacognitive dispositions that allow a person to monitor conduct and improve as a moral agent, such as: self-reflectiveness, open-mindedness, sensitivity to particulars, emotional integrity, and acceptance of responsibility.

5. *The making of moral commitments and the alteration of conduct.* Success in achieving the previous outcomes should produce a final outcome: students will embrace certain values (and reject others) and act morally (in acts characterized by decency, compassion, utility, care, good will, or supererogation, etc.). In short, they should more closely approach the model of a moral person:

These objectives are inseparably intertwined; they are complementary perspectives on morality. For example, displaying a virtuous character surely engages morally relevant capacities; and character education, which views the third and perhaps fourth elements as foundational, nevertheless cannot dismiss the others, though it may interpret them as derivative. It is my contention that seriously pursuing these outcomes—from the moment such education becomes purposeful and self-reflective—will inevitably engage liberal learning.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, my list so far is, I believe, incomplete; there is an essential element missing, one that is deeply connected to liberal learning: moral understanding.

## From Moral Education to Liberal Learning

Why does moral education lead to liberal learning? In the first place, the concept of a moral person is ineluctably tied to the concept of a good life; giving color to one, shades the other. Asking “*How should I act?*” or “*What should I value?*” really projects the question “*How should I live?*” with a shorter focal length. There are, moreover, clear connections to the various four strands of liberal education described earlier. The “moralization” of a person is a form of self-actualization, the realization of “a normative individuality.” If we are concerned to trigger value commitments and encourage moral conduct, we are led to prepare for a normative engagement with the world. And surely, we must have a basic understanding of our world if we are to be effective moral agents. These relationships seem obvious, requiring only articulation; more

needs to be said, however, regarding the link between moral education and the education-as-transmission-of-culture approach.

Traditionally, the study of encoded human experience is used in moral education to convey cultural norms and to provide compelling portrayals of moral exemplars. But perhaps more significant are the claims that, in all its blends of reasoning, speculation, fact, and fiction, such study demands and develops various moral capacities and skills—enlarging the moral imagination, encouraging empathy through vicarious subjectivity, increasing sensitivity to salient particulars. These are much-debated empirical claims, difficult to prove. In the recent past, many educators accepted these claims but used them to critique the curriculum: they said, in effect, that in order to truly enlarge a student's moral imagination in a global society, the range of cultures whose legacy was transmitted should be expanded—more different voices from the vast body of distilled human experience should be heard. Those critics (with whom I identify) have largely succeeded, and the heritage of human works students typically encounter is now much more inclusive. Other critics claim, however, that this is neither efficient nor productive; a more effective strategy to achieve these desired outcomes—developing capacities and increasing first- and second-order moral skills—is experiential education. Direct experience, not mediated or vicarious experience, has the real impact in, for example, developing the capacity to care, or inculcating a tolerant attitude. We all understand the pull of this argument, but no experience is pure and unmediated, and what meaning we may derive from an experience depends upon what we bring to it. This argument points us toward the issue of moral understanding, the desired outcome of moral education that was missing from my list. Let's now add:

6. *The deepening of moral understanding.* Moral education strives to provide the relevant knowledge, perspectives, or understanding that a moral person requires, such as an understanding of oneself and other people, of the implications of social practices, of cultural values, of the moral point of view or aspects of moral theory.

How important to moral education is the goal of deepening moral understanding? Most philosophers and educators have had doubts about the radical Socratic position that understanding is everything: virtue is knowledge. Aristotle spearheaded that response by showing (convincingly, for most of us) that intellectual and moral virtues differ, that morality requires practical wisdom (*phronesis*) or the art of good judgment, and is threatened by weakness of will and other factors.<sup>29</sup> But Aristotle never claimed that knowledge is irrelevant to virtue; that right action is altogether divorced from understanding. Yet, as Australian philosopher Jean Curthoys has written, “astonishingly few philosophers have reconsidered the extent to which moral questions may be questions of understanding. But without some such notion, morality will not have depth and nor, therefore, will the moral philosophy that purports to elucidate it.” Her comment occurs in a review of Christopher Cordner's beautiful and evocative work, *Ethical Encounter*. She states that Cordner traces our deepest moral intuitions to a “sensitive understanding, which is the core of our moral life.” In Cordner's vision, this requires a deep, empathic knowledge of the other people, and transformative emotional experiences, as of love, awe, disgust, and reverence. As Curthoys notes, “The understanding involved, however, is not of the purely cognitive kind, and is accessible to all, whatever their educational level.”<sup>30</sup> These observations might lead one to conclude that even if we grant understanding a significant place in moral education, it is an understanding that won't be achieved through liberal learning. But let's not be too hasty. First, there may be an old, dubious assumption at work in this

interchange that says emotions are non-cognitive, though Curthoys does note that the understanding required is “not of the *purely* cognitive kind.”<sup>31</sup> Second, in a sustained analysis of one case of moral understanding, Cordner focuses on the agent’s “seeing [another person and her situation] in the light of” a “web of meaning.” One person can understand another’s situation “only so far as he or she can imaginatively participate in that web of human meaning.”<sup>32</sup> So once again, we are led to the need to develop moral imagination and a web of meaning, and it is precisely for these tasks and that sense of moral depth that we turn to liberal education. It isn’t that lived experience is irrelevant or even unnecessary; the point is rather that our lived experience and liberal learning—learning that focuses on our life and living it well; learning that dwells in the full range of human experience; that helps us become who we are, understand ourselves and our situation, grasp the forces that shape our lives, and act effectively in the world—enhance and sustain each other.

## Concluding Thoughts

Both liberal and moral education aim to be (and often are) transformative—not merely in the sense that we come to possess more knowledge, acquire more skills, and know better how to fulfill our desires, etc., but also in the deeper sense that we acquire different perspectives, find our desires reformed, and activate new second order desires. They profoundly affect our identity. There is no fool-proof recipe, no algorithm, for educating a moral person, and often the best efforts at both liberal and moral education are tragically double-edged.<sup>33</sup> Both are life-long processes. *But the two are not identical.*

Liberal education is wider in scope than moral education: the concept of a good life that it addresses is more comprehensive than the concept of a moral life; it responds to additional sources of normativity, recognizing that there are more values in a flourishing and effective life than the moral—though “living morally” is an essential element. That is how liberal education can provide a critical perspective on moral education and its content. After all, the risks of “performance gaps” in moral education are many: the inculcation of judgmental attitudes, often without understanding; the over-reaching of moral claims; the caricaturing of moral exemplars; institutional indoctrination; the equation of moral commitment with closure of the mind; lopsided character development, such as a conscientiousness that lacks imagination, or a courage that lacks compassion—among others. Liberal learning is a significant, and sometimes essential, monitor of and corrective for these failures, and of assurance that moral learning is life-long and placed in the larger “web of meaning” of one’s life.

These are expansive claims for liberal learning, I know. Even those sympathetic readers who are willing to abandon stilted conceptions of liberal education in favor of the rich and evolving educational tradition I have described may reply sadly that such an educational experience simply is nowhere to be found. What I have described is, for them, if not an educational unicorn, then an ivory-billed woodpecker—once vibrant, now extinct or appearing only in rare, disputed sightings. In fact, the tradition of liberal education thrives in many places today (most clearly, in my experience, in strong liberal arts colleges): its recent evolutionary adaptations—innovations in curriculum, pedagogy, and the co-curriculum—are, as ever, responsive to social, intellectual, and technological developments. As a recent report of the Association of American Colleges and Universities put it: there has emerged a “strong trend toward pluralistic, collaborative, experiential, and integrative modes of learning.”<sup>34</sup> The language of “morality”

may be shifting to a preferred language of “ethics,” but the activities and mission statements of these colleges show a continuing concern for “character” and a focus on the quality of life. And there is some hopeful, empirical documentation of success.<sup>35</sup>

Although this evolution is as it should be—each age needs to shape a contemporary conception of liberal education—there are in fact significant threats to the tradition. At this late point, I will mention only one, the one that seems the most serious: it is the multi-faceted phenomenon of specialization, academic tribalism, and the cult of the major. The major was introduced to provide flexibility and the opportunity to pursue subjects of special, individual interest,<sup>36</sup> but it quickly (and ironically) became a requirement at most institutions. Today, it is widely taken to be the defining aspect of a degree (one gets a bachelor’s degree *in psychology*, for example); other components may be seen at best as simply supportive of the major, or at worst as extraneous requirements to be gotten out of the way. This is a result of several mutually-reinforcing factors: the explosion of knowledge resulting in a profusion of new disciplines and a dramatic increase in the specialization required to achieve genuine understanding; the increase in scale of institutions of higher learning, and the rise of the department as a unit of academic administration; and increasingly elaborated academic tribalism that discourages dialogue about matters outside the specialization. What is threatening, of course, is that the concern for the life one is to live and the discernment of a good life are pale, absent, irrelevant, or considered beyond the reach of serious scholarship. Rampant at research universities, these phenomena are incursive at liberal arts colleges as well.

It is, however, too early for despair. The boundaries of disciplines are eroding daily: disciplinary scholarship and research increasingly borrow intellectual tools, models, and techniques from other disciplines, and new interdisciplinary fields of study mushroom. The very terms “discipline” and “interdisciplinary” seem outmoded, but we have as yet no good language to replace them. (Academic departments do patrol their borders effectively: I suspect they may outlive the disciplines that once defined them, rather like the historic but arbitrary borders of nation states that no longer bound a culture or a people.) Moreover, concern for ethical issues—both for issues internal to the field and for the larger set of public issues which the field addresses—still resonates in these institutions of learning. And finally, the educational trends and innovations I alluded to earlier work to reduce disciplinary insularity.

Despite my optimism, I believe it is important not merely to celebrate, but to reclaim effectively the supreme purpose of liberal education. It is natural for faculty to see their courses as the units of educational meaning; some can grasp the major as a unit, a coherent whole to which their individual course makes a contribution. It is difficult for today’s faculty to grasp a degree as a unit of educational meaning, let alone the key unit. They may be the master of their own courses, only a competent contributor to the major, and simply flummoxed in debates about general education and graduation requirements. A profound educational paradox underlies this situation: one cannot put the supreme purpose of discerning and preparing for a good life as the direct and immediate objective of teaching without distorting the process and likely missing the mark. It is not likely to appear as a learning objective on any course syllabus. One works directly on subsidiary purposes—the study of the cultural legacy or the understanding of the world—or on contributory skills like critical thinking and effective communication. But it is also a mistake to forget about the supreme purpose altogether. When that happens, subsidiary aims rule: education becomes simply about knowing great works, engaging in political action, gaining a particular body of knowledge, developing a career, or

acquiring a skill; moral education may become vestigial, and liberal education fades. The ultimate aim of liberal education—the normative concern for one’s life as a whole and for living a human life well—needs to be a felt presence in our educational efforts. At the proper distance and height, yes, but tethered securely, and a felt presence nonetheless. It is the recognition of such a presence that guides the learner and makes a teacher truly an educator.<sup>37</sup>

## Notes

This chapter originally appeared in Joseph L. DeVitis and Tianlong Yu (eds.), *Character and Moral Education: A Reader* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

1. Perhaps I should also be clear about terms: by “education” I mean a formal, sequenced, and purposeful program of learning; “learning,” both as a process and as an achievement, has a wider range and may occur within and without education. “Schooling” is institutionalized education.
2. The phrase is widely attributed to Francis Oakley, President *Emeritus* of Williams College, as introduced in various conference speeches. For analysis of such narratives, see his “Against Nostalgia: Reflections on Our Present Discontents in American Higher Education” in *The Politics of Liberal Education*, edited by Darryl J. Gless and Barbara Herrnstein Smith (Duke, 1992).
3. This vivid phrase is used in this context by Elizabeth Kiss and L. Peter Euben in the introductory essay (p. 10) to their anthology, *Debating Moral Education: Rethinking the Role of the Modern University* (Duke, 2010).
4. This argument that the ideal of liberal education is sound but we are everywhere failing to live up to it has produced a large, polemical, and provocative literature. Examples range from Alan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Minds of Today’s Students* (Simon & Schuster, 1987) to A. T. Krohman’s *Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (Yale, 2007).
5. Examples of this expanding genre include: Jean-Francoise Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by G. B. Massumi (Minnesota, 1979, 1984); Jane Roland Martin, *Changing the Educational Landscape: Philosophy, Women, and Curriculum* (Routledge, 1994); and Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education* (Teachers College Press, 2nd ed. 2005).
6. This distinction between “concept” and “conception” gained traction, I believe, when used by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard, 1971) to distinguish the idea of justice from the various competing theories of justice. He modestly claimed to have borrowed it from H. L. A. Hart’s *The Concept of Law* (Oxford, 1961). While Hart does explicate “law” in a similar way, he does not use the contrasting terms “concept” and “conception.”
7. One may, of course, make the more ambitious argument and argue that the concept itself is flawed—by showing it to be incoherent, for example, or claiming that no workable conception is possible, or that it has inherent moral deficiencies. In making such an argument, one might even need to adduce prominent examples—“particular conceptions”—as cases in point. But such arguments need to have a different structure and import.
8. One of the most highly regarded histories of this tradition is Bruce A. Kimball’s *Orators & Philosophers: a History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (Columbia, 1986). My necessarily brief account of the liberal education tradition employs a different conceptual frame from Kimball’s; they are not, however, in opposition. I would also claim that although the tradition is clearly identified with Western cultures, elements of liberal education are part of the traditions of Eastern educational philosophy and practice as well, notably in the heritage of Confucianism. See for example, John Israel, “The Idea of Liberal Education in China,” in R. Morse, *The Limits of Reform in China* (Westview, 1983).
9. There is a large literature of such criticism, prominent examples of which include: Jean-Francoise Lyotard, *op. cit.*; Nel Noddings, *Educating Moral People* (Teachers College Press, 2002); Jane Roland Martin, *Changing the Educational Landscape: Philosophy, Women, and Curriculum* (Routledge, 1994); and D. G. Mulcahy, *The Educated Person: Toward a New Paradigm for Liberal Education* (Plymouth: Roman & Littlefield, 2008).
10. Compare Theodor Adorno’s essay, “Education After Auschwitz,” published in Adorno’s *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (Columbia, 1998). My thanks to Gary Mullen for calling this essay to my attention.

11. The process I describe here is intended to be conceptual not precisely chronological. There is no significance intended by the order in which I present these four strands of liberal education, nor do I claim they are exhaustive.
12. Versions of this strand differ on the principle of selection by which worthy elements of the legacy are determined, but most agree that: (a) the whole must be reviewed, reorganized, and refined by successor generations; and (b) the legacy long ago became too vast for any one learner, so a division of labor (some level of specialization) is clearly required. Among theorists in whose work this strand predominates, I would include Alan Bloom, Robert Hutchins, Mortimer Adler, and E. D. Hirsch.
13. Theorists for whom self-actualization predominates include: Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Nietzsche, and David Norton. Even in versions like Nietzsche's that self-consciously reject conventional moral standards, there is a normative individuality (for Nietzsche, the *Übermensch*) that is to be achieved through self-actualization.
14. Including the world of abstract ideas, what Karl Popper (after Gottlob Frege) termed "World 3," in distinction from "World 1" (physical objects and events) and "World 2" (subjective mental states) in several works, including *Objective Knowledge* (Clarendon, Oxford, 1972, 1979).
15. These are exemplified in, e.g., Aristotle's account of theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and Mill's concept of activities that yield "higher order" pleasures, in *Utilitarianism*.
16. Alfred N. Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (Free Press, 1929, 1957, 1967), p. 14.
17. An excellent account of Isocrates in relation to the tradition of liberal education may be found in Takis Poulakos, *Speaking for the Polis: Isocrates' Rhetorical Education* (University of South Carolina, 1997) and Janet M. Atwill, *Rhetoric Reclaimed: Aristotle and the Liberal Arts Tradition* (Cornell, 1998).
18. Among theorists who emphasize this strand I would include, in addition to Isocrates, John Stuart Mill, William James, and Paulo Freire. Recent trends in liberal education (see note 33) suggest it is resurgent.
19. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.
20. Michael Oakeshott, "Learning and Teaching," reprinted in Timothy Fuller (ed.), *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education* (Yale, 1989), p. 45.
21. This claim of continuity does not deny the evolution in the concept of freedom, ranging widely as it has from an achievement of self-determination to a natural condition of autonomy to a basic human right.
22. The "capabilities" approach was famously developed by Amartya Sen in *Commodities and Capabilities* (Oxford, 1985) and applied by Martha C. Nussbaum in *Women and Moral Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge, 2000).
23. I use the verb "moralize" here to mean "to improve the morals of, to make moral." It is a sign of social change as well as evolving usage that "moralize" now commonly connotes "to make moral pronouncements, to preach." By "rectify," I mean to align with moral values, such as justice, fairness, or compassion. See also note 1.
24. No doubt, the sense of purposefulness may often be stronger and clearer for the educator than the student; their purposes may in fact be disjoint. The terms I am using here are analyzed by Peter Jarvis in *Towards a Comprehensive Theory of Human Learning* (Routledge, 2006).
25. I do not mean to suggest that every moral theory presents its conception of a moral person in a singular profile. The theory-derived concept of a moral person may be quite open, comprehending many different qualities and characters with minimal constraints; it may even focus on achieving a society in which different moral perspectives are balanced in a moral ecology; or it may be quite restrictive and homogeneous in its prescription.
26. The authority of moral theory is likely to be required for more formal, institutionalized practices; the moral education conducted in families, by organized youth activities like sports and scouting, is more likely to be drawn from shared experience (except perhaps in the families of some resolute philosophers or psychologists, where theory may reign).
27. This is an implication of nearly all programs of moral education, whether they are drawn from "virtue ethics" and "character education" theories or not.
28. Note that I am using "liberal learning," not "liberal education." See note 1.
29. Aristotle, *op. cit.*
30. All quoted material is from her piece, "Understanding Others" in *Australian Book Review*, 2002, p. 47. I have adopted her way of framing the issue.
31. Italics are mine.
32. Christopher Cordner, *Ethical Encounter: The Depth of Moral Meaning* (Palgrave, 2002), p. 170.



33. For a compelling portrayal and analysis of bittersweet educational transformations, see Jane Roland Martin, *Educational Metamorphoses: Philosophical Reflections on Identity and Culture* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).
34. Quoted from a report by Carol G. Schneider and Robert Schoenberg, *Contemporary Understandings of Liberal Education* (AAC&U, 1998). See also the report by Hart Research Associates, *Trends and Emerging Practices in Liberal Education* (AAC&U, 2009) accessed in July 2010 at: [http://www.aacu.org/membership/documents/2009MemberSurvey\\_Part2.pdf](http://www.aacu.org/membership/documents/2009MemberSurvey_Part2.pdf).
35. The trends I cite are described in Kiss and Euben, *op. cit.*, pp. 3ff. The life-long research led by Alexander Astin at UCLA is perhaps the most widely recognized on the effects of the practices of liberal education—though sometimes longitudinal, it is mostly survey-based, not behavioral. His work (with various partners and teams) has appeared in various works, from *Four Critical Years: Effects of College on Beliefs, Attitudes, and Knowledge* (Jossey-Bass, 1977) to *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives* (Jossey-Bass, 2010).
36. President Charles William Eliot of Harvard University introduced the “elective” system of courses in 1885. See his speech, “How to Transform a College with One Uniform Curriculum into a University,” at [http://www.higher-ed.org/resources/Charles\\_Eliot.htm](http://www.higher-ed.org/resources/Charles_Eliot.htm) (accessed July 2010).
37. My thanks to John C. Hill, whose impressive work as undergraduate research assistant was invaluable during the writing of this article; and to my colleagues, Lisa Portmess and Gail Ann Rickert, who read an earlier version and generously offered perceptive comments.