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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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Comments

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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 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.

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. Advocates may write as though the term refers to the only *genuine* education. Yet liberal education is a distinctive type of education: One may, in principle, debate its value without questioning the value of education itself or implicating other forms of education. It is therefore misleading to identify it either with education *tout court* or with a *good* education. Such confusions about the concept are common because liberal education has in fact been so pre-eminent, 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 practice. But building 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 essential components of a 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 components, 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 and contemplation 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 practical reasoning—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 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 John 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 such as Seneca and Cicero; it became a standard usage by the Middle Ages. Even earlier, Aristotle, among Classical Greek writers, used the cognate term *technai eleutheriai* and related forms (*Politics*, 1337b to 1338b) to designate studies that encouraged intellectual and moral values, in contrast to "banausic" or practical studies, such as technical training. Both the Greek and Latin terms may be rendered equally well as "the liberal arts" or as "the skills of freedom"; they denote prescribed disciplines, meaning both bodies of knowledge to be studied and regimens for the mastery of skills or crafts. This educational regime featured a breadth of study in subjects that comprehensively represented the most valuable forms of learning for free individuals.

The proper list of liberal arts disciplines and their relative priority has been the subject of frequent dispute. The prototype of such debate is the conflict between Socrates and the Sophists, continued in the competitive schools of Plato and Isocrates, in which the tension focused on the comparative importance

of dialectic and rhetoric. In the 2nd century BCE, Varro employed a list of nine liberal arts (*Nine Books of Disciplines*) as the basis for organizing knowledge. Two of those, medicine and architecture, 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 substantive 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 philologiae et Mercurii* (written between 410 and 429 CE). It portrayed the marriage of eloquence and wisdom, celebrated 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 experience based on classic texts. Beginning perhaps with Pierpaolo Vergerio's *De ingenuis moribus et liberalibus studiis* (1403), and elaborated in the works of thinkers such as Leonardo Bruni, Erasmus, and Juan Luis Vives, 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 knowledge 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, political science, 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 specialized study.

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. Theorists who nonetheless look to curricular content have sought firmer ground from two other sources: a treasury of endowed cultural artifacts or deeper epistemic structures that underlie the disciplines. Those turning to culture, most of them heirs to 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 Maynard Hutchins (1929–1951) proclaimed the 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 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 pursued 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 conversation 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 notorious risks of parochial vision, subjective bias, and presumptuous cultural hegemony.

Alternatively, theorists may locate the content of liberal education in fundamental epistemic 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 distinctive pedagogies. In this approach, 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 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 a clarifying and deepening the understanding of contested concepts. But one could speak more broadly 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, that embodies the love of learning, or that constantly 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 another Chicago advocate of 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 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 corporate or utilitarian values, faculty inattention to teaching, overspecialization, 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, elitist 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—or 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 pronounce 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 educational institutions of numerous recently liberated countries around the world.

Daniel R. DeNicola

See also Adler, Mortimer, and the Paideia Program; Cultural Literacy and Core Knowledge/Skills; Education, Concept of; Essentialism, Perennialism, and the “Isms” Approach; Knowledge, Structure of: From Aristotle to Bruner and Hirst; Liberalism; Oakeshott, Michael

Further Readings

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LIBERALISM

The meaning of liberalism, conveyed immediately by the term itself, involves a political philosophy centrally devoted to liberty. As 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 Stuart 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 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 forms 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 champions, 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 basic 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 legitimate political order 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 scholars frequently argue 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