

The Meaning of Things

Part 3 - Education

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Education

Only the educated are free.

EPICETUS

Education, and especially 'liberal education', is what makes civil society possible. That means it has an importance even greater than its contribution to economic success, which, alas, is all that politicians seem to think it is for.

To understand the civilising and ethical role of liberal education we need to escape from narrow definitions of 'morality' as conceived in modern times (i.e. since the seventeenth century), and return to a more inclusive classical conception of 'ethics'. As the notion now operates, morality applies just to part of life – to some aspects of human relationships, and to some aspects of character and behaviour. No one thinks that eating bananas is a moral matter, nor whether a person chooses to work in a bank or a building society, or what colour he paints his house. The ancient Greeks thought differently. For them the whole of life is an ethical matter: one lives and does well as a whole person, they said, and both one's flourishing and one's effect on others flow from one's overall character. For this reason life has to be considered – remember Socrates' dictum – and it can only be considered if it is informed. And this is where liberal education comes in.

By 'liberal education' is meant education that includes lit-

erature, history and appreciation of the arts, and gives them equal weight with scientific and practical subjects. Education in these pursuits opens the possibility for us to live more reflectively and knowledgeably, especially about the range of human experience and sentiment, as it exists now and here, and in the past and elsewhere. That, in turn, makes us better understand the interests, needs and desires of others, so that we can treat them with respect and sympathy, however different the choices they make or the experiences that have shaped their lives. When respect and sympathy is returned, rendering it mutual, the result is that the gaps which can prompt friction between people, and even war in the end, come to be bridged or at least tolerated. The latter is enough.

The vision is utopian; no doubt there were SS officers who read Goethe and listened to Beethoven, and then went to work in the gas chambers; so liberal education does not automatically produce better people. But it does so far more often than the stupidity and selfishness which arise from lack of knowledge and impoverishment of insight.

Liberal education is a vanishing ideal in the contemporary West, most notably in its Anglophone regions. Education is mainly restricted to the young, and it is no longer liberal education as such but something less ambitious and too exclusively geared to the specific aims – otherwise, of course, very important – of employability. This is a loss; for the aim of liberal education is to produce people who go on learning after their formal education has ceased; who think, and question, and know how to find answers when they need them. This is especially significant in the case of political and moral dilemmas in society, which will always occur and will always have to be negotiated afresh; so members of a community cannot afford to be unreflective and ill-informed if civil society is to be sustainable.

Educating at a high level is expensive, and demands major

investment by a society. But attaining the goal of high-quality education offers glittering prizes. It promises to produce a greater proportion of people who are more than mere foot-soldiers in the economic struggle, by helping them both to get and to give more in their social and cultural experience, and to have lives more fulfilling and participatory both in work and outside it – especially in the amenities of social intercourse, and in the responsibilities of civic and political engagement. People who are better informed and more reflective are more likely to be considerate than those who are – and who are allowed to remain – ignorant, narrow-minded, selfish, and uncivil in the profound sense that characterises so much human experience now.

There is no denying that education is an essential preparation for life and work in an advanced economy. Modern economies require skilled and motivated workers, who can only profit from the opportunities they afford if they are equipped to respond to their demands. So much is now received wisdom.

But a large part of the problem with education is that this connection has become too direct. Aristotle said that we educate ourselves so that we can make noble use of our leisure; this is a view directly opposed to the contemporary belief that we educate ourselves in order to get a job. To that extent the contemporary view distorts the purpose of schooling, by aiming not at the development of individuals as ends in themselves, but as instruments in the economic process.

The key is to distinguish education from training, to recognise that people require both, and to be unabashed about what is involved in the latter. Young children need to be trained in multiplication tables, reading, spelling and writing, exactly as an athlete trains his body: it takes coaching, repetition and practice. When children have acquired skills they can use by reflex, it gives them the confidence and the materials to profit

from the next step, which is education proper: the process of learning to think and to know how to find and use information when needed. Above all, education involves refining capacities for judgment and evaluation; Heraclitus remarked that learning is only a means to an end, which is understanding – and understanding is the ultimate value in education.

'Education' etymologically means 'leading out' or 'bringing out', an idea which owes itself to an improbable but long-influential theory put forward by Plato. He believed that we have pre-existing immortal souls which know all things in their disembodied state, but which we forget at birth. On Plato's theory, learning is thus remembering; schooling is the activity of bringing out what is immemorially lodged in our minds. The theory was modified in more sensible directions by later thinkers, who saw education as the evocation of talents and capabilities implicit in the individual, rather than innate knowledge. In one good sense, this is closer to the mark: we still think that human gifts can be helped to flourish if given the right opportunities.