

The Liberal Arts as Conversation

Jack Kerwick

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Undoubtedly, more confusion abounds at present over the nature of a liberal arts education than at any other time. In what follows, I explore three ideals for education—traditionalism, careerism, and activism. In exposing their weaknesses, I take my cue from the philosopher Michael Oakeshott and advocate on behalf of imagining a liberal arts education in terms of a *conversation*, what, for lack of a better term, I will call “conversationalism.” According to Oakeshott, a liberal arts education hasn’t any purpose *beyond itself*. In expositing upon this image of higher learning, I will contrast the nature of a conversation with two other modes of discourse with which it is commonly confused: *argument* and *inquiry*.

Traditionalism

Unlike careerism and activism, traditionalism insists that a liberal arts education is resolutely *nonutilitarian*. From this perspective, one’s decision to enter college is nothing more or less than the decision to embark upon a quest for knowledge for the sake of knowledge—not for the sake of any *practical*

Jack Kerwick is a lecturer in philosophy at Burlington County College, Pemberton, NJ 08068; jackk610@verizon.net. His areas of specialization are ethics and political philosophy, with a particular interest in the classical conservative tradition. His work has appeared in both scholarly journals and popular publications.

concerns. The knowledge that a higher education was thought to provide is what may be called “useless” knowledge.¹ Useless knowledge is knowledge that hasn’t any obvious bearing upon the affairs of everyday life.

Traditionalism is a noble, time-honored ideal. And traditionalists are to be commended for striving to uphold the belief that a liberal arts education was never meant to serve as a means to some specified end. Nonetheless, traditionalism has its problems.²

For starters, traditionalism’s attempt to establish the nonutilitarian—the purposeless—character of a liberal arts education must be judged a failure: the concept of knowledge for knowledge’s sake and that of a pursuit are irreconcilable. A pursuit, after all, is purposeful. If the purpose of a liberal arts education is to promote a pursuit, namely, the pursuit of knowledge, then it *is* subservient to securing a goal, an unrealized state of affairs.

However much time one commits to study, one can never hope to come even remotely close to reaching the end of the inquiry that is a liberal arts education. Thus, like happiness or love, the goal of a higher education—the fulfillment of the inquiry—becomes that much more *elusive* the more relentlessly one pursues it. For a suitable ideal of liberal learning we must turn elsewhere.

Careerism

In this approach to education, colleges and universities exist for the sake of securing livelihoods for students. A liberal arts education is an instrument, the means to a substantive state of affairs to which it is wholly subservient, the mechanism by which graduates promise to make money doing what they’ve been prepared to do.

In spite of the popularity of this ideal, careerism is profoundly inadequate. If a college education derives its worth as job preparation it isn’t a genuine education at all; it is now *training*: careerism assimilates a college education to training in a “vocation.” But the kind of knowledge conveyed via training in a trade is what Michael Oakeshott describes as “technical knowledge,” knowledge that can be “formulated into rules which are, or may be, deliberately learned, remembered”

¹For an interesting discussion of “useless knowledge,” see Alan Watts, *Tao: The Watercourse Way* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975).

²In recent times, particularly with the onset of postmodernism, traditionalism has been challenged to the point of mocking dismissal. It has become an axiom among many academics that the idea of a *disinterested* pursuit of knowledge is rhetoric designed to conceal the ideological, political, and/or economic interests of those who have advanced it. According to this view, there can be no disinterested pursuit of knowledge or truth not only because there is no such thing as disinterestedness, but because there is no such thing as knowledge or truth. Knowledge and truth are at once imaginary and intimidating, disempowering those who dare to question the status quo. But we will see how conversationalism deflects this criticism.

and written “down...in a book.”³ Since it “is susceptible of formulation...in propositions,”⁴ technical knowledge is what may be called *propositional* knowledge. However, the idea that knowledge is essentially propositional is an illusion: only some knowledge, and not even the better part of it, can be codified in propositions. Much—indeed, most—knowledge is imbibed through “continuous contact with one who is perpetually practicing it.” It “can neither be taught nor learned,” as Oakeshott argues, “but only imparted and acquired.”⁵ Moreover, as long as a liberal arts education is esteemed on account of the occupation that it is supposed to secure, we have no choice but to conclude that the study of the liberal arts is an irrational engagement, since it does not prepare the student for a specific career.⁶

Activism

For proponents of the activist ideal, the purpose of a liberal arts education is the promotion of political goals and the means by which to implement them. From this perspective, students are regarded as activists-in-training, the agents of transformative change that will bring to fruition the utopian schemes of their professors.

One difficulty with activism is that subordinating education to politics inevitably destroys education. The political is a species of the practical, precisely that mode of human activity centered in the pursuit and obtainment of needs and desires. But a liberal arts education is distinguished by its ability to arrest—not exacerbate—the relentless torrent of wants we are forever trying to satisfy. Furthermore, activism reduces students to ideologues-in-training, for the activist ideal insists upon habituating them into assuming an *adversarial* stance toward their own civilization.⁷

³Michael Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics,” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1991), 12.

⁴Ibid., 14.

⁵Ibid., 15.

⁶Some have attributed the condition of the contemporary university to what they describe as “excessive careerism.” I think that they’ve struck upon the wrong culprit. But for an insightful analysis on this score, see Thomas Naylor and William Willimon, *The Abandoned Generation: Rethinking Higher Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdsman Publishing Co., 1995).

⁷The problems with activism have long been noted by conservatives and other critics of the leftist ideology from which the activist ideal draws virtually all of its sustenance. However, it’s imperative to recognize that the undesirability of the activist ideal does not stem from leftist ideology, but that an education in the liberal arts has been replaced by training in *any* ideology. In other words, the remedy to the activist ideal is not to recruit “conservative” faculty, for a training in right-wing ideology is just as antithetical to the character of a liberal arts education.

The Conversational Ideal: Education as a Conversation

A liberal arts education is not simply the pursuit of knowledge, a career, or the modes of thought and techniques necessary for inaugurating a political utopia. A liberal arts education isn't a pursuit of anything at all beyond itself. A fitting image would be to call it a conversation.

A conversation is neither an inquiry nor an argument, both of which are defined by their respective goals—their conclusions. Conversation, in glaring contrast, has no further goal. Michel de Montaigne expressed this insight when he said of conversation that it is “the most *delightful* activity in our lives.”⁸ In *Conversation: A History of a Declining Art*, essayist Stephen Miller underscores this point when he remarks that conversation “is not instrumental.”⁹ Miller quotes Judith Martin, the author of *Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior*: “From the direct sales pitch to a play for the goodwill of influential people, the rule is that if it is designed to advance your career, it isn't conversation.”¹⁰

In elaborating upon the nature of conversation, Oakeshott writes that it “is not an enterprise designed to yield an extrinsic profit”; rather, it is “an unrehearsed intellectual adventure.”¹¹ Partners in conversation “are not engaged in an inquiry or a debate: there is no ‘truth’ to be discovered, no proposition to be proved, no conclusion sought,” thus bypassing the postmodern attack on any idea of certainty.¹² Fellow conversationalists “are not concerned to inform, to persuade, or to refute one another,” but rather “differ without disagreeing.”¹³ Furthermore, the knowledge to be had from inquiries and arguments is propositional. A different kind of knowing is culled from conversation, a knowledge that is less susceptible to explicit articulation, an awareness of nuances made possible by immersion in the conversation itself.

There are three advantages to conceiving of a liberal arts education in terms of a conversation.

First, the idea of education as a conversation underscores the autonomy of each of the disciplines that together comprise a liberal arts education. Conversation is impossible in the absence of multiple voices, and the

⁸Michel de Montaigne, *On Friendship*, from *The Complete Essays*, trans. M.A. Screech (1580; New York: Penguin Classics, 1991), 32.

⁹Stephen Miller, *Conversation: A History of a Declining Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 13.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Michael Oakeshott, “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,” in *Rationalism in Politics*, 490.

¹²*Ibid.*, 489.

¹³*Ibid.*

conversation that is the study of the liberal arts is impossible in the absence of multiple disciplines. The disciplines, in other words, are irreducibly distinct voices. Hence, it is as impossible as it is rude—Oakeshott calls it an exercise in “barbarism”¹⁴—for any voice to evaluate others by its own standards: the integrity of each voice precludes such attempts.

Second, the cornerstone virtue inculcated by an education in the liberal arts is not, as lately has typically been thought, “tolerance.” Rather, it is *considerateness*. Students are equally obliged to contribute their respective voices to the conversation *and* permit others to do the same. *Listening*, then, is as important as *speaking*.

Third, students often question “the usefulness” of their course material, to which conversationalists have a ready reply: A liberal arts education is no more and no less “useful” than any other intrinsically valuable activity such as, say, spending time with friends. To borrow Oakeshott’s term, a liberal arts education is resolutely not “utilitarian,” it is “dramatic.”¹⁵ When the eye is on the merely useful, the desire is to exploit. But “useless” engagements are occasions in which to delight.

According to conversationalism, knowledge primarily consists of intellectual and moral habits, not propositions. As English educator and poet William Johnson Cory said, students “are not engaged so much in acquiring knowledge as in making mental efforts under criticism.”¹⁶ While a “certain amount of knowledge” can be secured and recollected, much is forgotten. And yet, this is no cause for regret, “for the shadow of lost knowledge at least protects” students “from many illusions.” Still, Cory asserts, an education isn’t so much for “knowledge as for developing arts and habits.” A liberal arts education supplies students with “the habit of attention,” “the art of expression,” “the art of assuming at a moment’s notice a new intellectual position,” “the art of entering quickly into another person’s thoughts,” “the habit of submitting to censure and refutation,” “the art of indicating assent or dissent in graduated terms,” “the habit of regarding minute points of accuracy,” and “the art of working out what is possible in a given time.”¹⁷

A liberal arts education understood as a conversation breeds “taste, discrimination,” “mental courage and mental soberness.” Perhaps most

¹⁴Ibid., 492.

¹⁵Michael Oakeshott, “On Being Conservative,” in *Rationalism in Politics*, 417.

¹⁶Oakeshott, “Voice of Poetry,” 491, citing William Johnson Cory, *Eton Reform*, vol. 2 (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861), 6, archived at <https://archive.org/details/etonreform02cory>.

¹⁷Quoted material taken from Cory, *Eton Reform*, 6–7.

important, such an education makes possible a degree of “self-knowledge” that would have otherwise remained foreclosed to students.¹⁸

When a liberal arts education is understood in terms of a conversation, it is not the mastery of rules, principles, facts, methods—summarily, propositions. Rather, the aim of an education so conceived is the cultivation of the excellences of mind and character, head and heart, virtues—“habits and arts”—that endure long after students have obtained their degrees.

¹⁸Ibid., 492.