

Why Doing Isn't Everything

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I

Every college or university student or professor has heard the question; most of us have asked it ourselves. "How will this help me be a ..." The sentence gets completed with the name of some occupation or profession. "How will this help me be a computer programmer?" "How will this help me be an engineer?" "How will this help me be a businessman?" The question gets asked at the beginning of the semester when the student is counseled as to the courses he should take. "How will that course help me be an accountant?" It gets asked in the middle of the semester when the class seems to be going nowhere: "How will this help me be a coach?" It gets asked with special urgency when time for the final examination comes: "How will all this stuff help me be a nurse?"

It is characteristic of defenders of the liberal arts to beat up on those who ask these questions. I will not be doing that. All of us must play a variety of roles in our society, and most college and university students hope that among the social roles they will be playing will be some more or less steady occupation or profession. An occupation or profession may be the last thing that a few children of the wealthy want; they have their eye set on being playboys or playgirls. But there aren't many of those.

Now note that to hold some occupation or profession requires training. One is not born a computer programmer, nor is one born a carpenter. So if you have your eye set on some particular occupation or profession as the one you think is right for you, it is natural and appropriate to ask what knowledge and skills you will need for that occupation or profession; likewise it is natural and appropriate to ask, when you are being told to study something that, so far as you can see, does not contribute to your occupational goal, to be shown how it does contribute.

So as I say, I will not be beating up on those who ask one or another of these "How will this help me?" questions. I will not be charging them with succumbing to the pragmatism of American culture, or some other such evil. And let me add that those who give speeches denouncing these "How will this help me?" questions, and the evils of pragmatism that they spy lurking behind them, almost certainly themselves asked the very same question when they were students. "How will this help me be a philosophy professor?" "How will this help me be a professor of American literature?" There is a strange and hypocritical lack of self-awareness in such people. Being a teacher of one of the liberal arts is also a profession for which one equips oneself.

In what follows I want to make a case for liberal arts education. But not only will I not be making my case by attacking these "How will this help me?" questions; on this occasion I will also not be making it by arguing that a liberal arts education will make you a better engineer, a better computer programmer, a better businessman, a better farmer, or whatever. I have friends in business who tell me that they are grateful for the liberal arts education they received in college, insisting that it has helped them be better businessmen. I accept their

testimony. But I judge occupational utility to be, all in all, not the strongest reed on which to rest the case for liberal arts education. I want instead to argue that, given the nature of human beings and their odyssey on earth, the existence of liberal arts education is one of the most natural things in the world.

II

What I have in mind by liberal arts education will become increasingly clear as I proceed; but let me give a preliminary explanation here at the beginning. There are different approaches to explaining what liberal arts education is. Some explain it negatively, in terms of what it is not: liberal arts education is education not aimed at equipping one to hold down some particular occupation or profession. There is something right about this explanation. But I think we all want something more, since one can imagine all sorts of educational programs whose goal is not equipping the student to hold down some particular occupation or profession but which are nonetheless not liberal arts education.

Another approach is to emphasize the etymology of the word "liberal." Our word "liberal" comes from the Latin *liber*, meaning "free." Liberal arts education, so it is often said, is education that frees us. Obviously one has to go on to say what it is that it frees us from, and to explain why it is that vocationally oriented education does not similarly free us. The Cambridge (England) political theorist, Michael Oakeshott, in his essay, "Education: The Engagement and its Frustration," articulated this approach as profoundly as anyone ever has. Oakeshott regarded liberal arts education as the only true form of education; everything else, so he insisted, is no more than education so-called. And the point and function of liberal arts education is to liberate us from the closed-in particularities of our specific historical and social situation into the wide-open possibilities of humanity's understandings, imaginings, and desirings.

Oakeshott is on to something here. But for some time now, what I myself have found especially helpful in thinking about liberal arts education is an almost stray observation made by the American sociologist Talcott Parsons in one of his books (Parsons). To understand the observation, we must keep in mind the distinction between culture and society. On this occasion I will not try to explain the distinction; I will assume that such grasp of it as you already have will be adequate for our purposes here. I simply urge you to keep the distinction in mind.

The observation of Parsons that I found illuminating, and that stuck in my mind, is that one of the salient differences between modern societies and tribal societies is that we in modern societies have a vast deposit of culture available to us that did not arise from within our society and that has relatively little direct social function in our society. The point is obvious – obvious once someone has made it! And the passage in which Parsons made the point was unremarkable. Nonetheless it had the force of revelation for me. For years I had been trying to grasp the essence, the core, of liberal arts education, always feeling that I had failed. Now suddenly I saw what it was. Liberal arts education, as it has taken shape in the West over the past four or five centuries, is education aimed at inducting the student into that enduring, socially transcendent cultural heritage – into the philosophy, the literature, the art, the music, the science, that is handed down to us. Being inducted into that stream of culture may liberate one, as

Oakeshott claims. It may make one a better businessperson, as some of my friends in business claim. But whatever its worth, its essence is simply induction into our cultural heritage.

III

To explain why I think the emergence of such education is natural rather than problematic, we must begin with basics, specifically, with what it is to be human. I will have to be brief and incomplete.

To be human is to interpret, not as an option but as a necessity. Reality of many different sorts presents itself to us. But we are not simply blotters, soaking in the given. If beliefs about the reality presented to us are to emerge, we must ourselves contribute to the interchange. We must interpret. For the given can in principle be construed in different ways; its import, its significance, its meaning, can be interpreted differently. We must adopt one among the options. It appears that some of our interpreting is hard-wired – to borrow a metaphor from the world of computers. We human beings are, for example, hard-wired to interpret our sensory experience as the experience of an external world. But most of our interpretations are not hard-wired, and when and where they are not, we not only find variations from society to society, but disagreements within a given society.

Second, to be human is to imagine – to imagine how things may well be in the future in contrast to how they are in the present, and beyond that, to imagine how they could be even if they never will be that way. It is even possible to imagine what could not possibly be; witness those impossible buildings in some of M. C. Escher's prints. So deep into our nature goes this power of imagining that we seldom take note of it. But there it is. We imagine musical lines and harmonies different from any we have ever heard, visual designs different from any we have ever seen, buildings different from any we have ever come across, ways of putting words together into sentences different from any we have ever heard or read. We imagine mathematical structures, physical theories, philosophical accounts.

Third, to be human is to act and prize "under the aspect of the good" – to borrow a nice piece of jargon from the medieval philosophers. What they meant is that we human beings act as we do and prize as we do for the reason that we judge it good to act thus, and for the reason that we judge it good to prize this or that. Unlike the other animals, we act for "reasons," not simply in conformity with causal laws, and those reasons are evaluative reasons.

Lastly, what accompanies these foregoing capacities for interpreting, imagining, and acting and prizing under the aspect of the good, is a capacity for delight and satisfaction that goes vastly beyond enjoyment of the sensory. We find happiness in solving a mathematical problem, delight in a line of poetry, satisfaction from finally understanding something that had previously baffled us. A few of us even experience the mysterious satisfaction of getting to the top of Mount Everest in spite of excruciating pain along the way.

In summary: to be human is to interpret the given, to imagine alternatives to the facts, to act and prize under the aspect of the good, and to find enjoyment in doing these. This is by no means all of what it is to be human; but this is certainly part of it.

IV

The rhetoric I have used up to this point may have evoked in you the picture of each of us by ourselves exercising our humanity in the form of individual perishing episodes of these four sorts. The reality is far different. So if that is your picture – individual perishing acts performed by individual persons – let me now correct it in two ways.

In the first place, there are not just individual discrete acts of interpreting, imagining, and so forth, but “ways” of interpreting, “ways” of imagining, “ways” of acting and prizing under the aspect of the good, “ways” of enjoying. What I have in mind in speaking of “ways” is not simply that there are similarities among distinct episodes of interpreting, of imagining, and the like, but that certain patterns of these are socially embodied and transmitted. In no society does one find a random assortment of interpretations; one finds characteristic ways of interpreting. And as a child emerges from infancy, he or she is inducted into these ways, largely by modeling, sometimes by explicit instruction. Native American youth of eight hundred years ago were inducted into certain ways of interpreting the heavens, certain ways of interpreting birth and death, certain ways of valuing the things around them and of acting thereon. The same is true for you and me. Let me put the point by saying that to be human is to be “enculturated.”

It should at once be added that one’s enculturation is always into some specific culture. No one is “enculturated” into human culture in general, since there is no such thing as human culture in general. You and I have been inducted into ways of interpreting, imagining, valuing, and enjoying typical of modern Western culture, ways profoundly different from those of Native Americans of centuries ago. Lest deterministic implications be drawn from this observation, let me add that here too our powers of imagination come into play. We are capable, to some extent, of imagining alternatives to the ways of interpreting, imagining, valuing, and enjoying that we have been socially inducted into.

And now for the second way in which the exercise of our fundamental human powers does not simply come in the form of individual perishing acts. Our interpretations and imaginings are embodied in artifacts, and these artifacts endure, sometimes briefly, sometimes for millennia. They are embodied in two- and three-dimensional visual designs that endure beyond the act of composition, in habitations that endure beyond the act of construction, in tools and utensils that endure beyond the act of making. When writing comes on the scene, they are embodied in sentences that endure beyond the act of inscribing. When musical notation comes on the scene, they are embodied in instructions for musical performance that endure beyond the act of composition and beyond all acts of performance.

Let me pull these two points together. Interpretings, imaginings, and the valuing that go into acting and prizing, are handed down from one generation to the next. When that happens, they become tradition. They are handed down in the form of socially embodied ways or practices that the elders teach the youth; likewise they are handed down in the form of enduring artifacts that embody interpretations, imaginations, and valuations. Some of you will know that Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his magisterial *Truth and Method*, argued that there

is a significant difference between writing, on the one hand, and all the other things I have mentioned on the other. Writing, he said, is handed down as tradition, whereas paintings, buildings, sculptures, pots, tools, and so forth, are merely left over. Though I cannot argue the point here, I think Gadamer's distinction is untenable.

V

One more factor must be brought into the picture. Though in the nature of the case sculptures, paintings, buildings, masks, tools, and so forth, endure beyond the act of making, it appears that, for the most part, people in tribal societies made no particular effort to preserve such artifacts. Those gigantic totem poles carved by Native Americans along our northwest coast were placed outdoors in the rain, the snow, the sun, the wind, and allowed to decay. But back into antiquity we can spy the emergence in some societies of a certain preservationist impulse. And in some of these, in turn, we can spy the emergence of a certain eclecticist impulse. What I mean by this last is that not only were artifacts produced by members of one's own society preserved, but artifacts were collected from other societies and preserved as well. Both impulses, the preservationist and the eclecticist, became a rage, of sorts, in imperial Roman society.

Impulses toward eclecticism and preservationism are, of course, always selective. Always there are many artifacts from its own past that a society has no interest in preserving; and always there are distinct limitations on the sort of artifacts from other societies that a society finds it worthwhile to collect and preserve. Mainly it was certain artifacts from the society of ancient Athens that the Romans found it worthwhile to haul off to Rome and preserve; they had no interest in, say, Babylonian artifacts. And mainly it was the texts from the past that medieval society in the West collected and preserved; they had no interest in collecting and preserving the visual art and architecture of antiquity. The Renaissance represented a revolution in that regard. What a society finds worthwhile to collect and preserve depends very much, of course, on its interpretations.

Let me conclude this part of my argument by observing that there has never been a society in which these twin passions of preservationism and eclecticism have been so intense as they are in modern Western society. I am well aware that anti-preservationist passions erupt every now and then. Penn Station in New York was the victim of such a passion, as were the centers of the two cities that I call home, Grand Rapids and New Haven. But lamentable as I find the destruction caused by such passions – who could not lament the destruction of Penn Station – that lament has to be contextualized. Never has a society been so concerned to preserve cultural artifacts from our own history and from around the world as is the modern West. I will leave it to others to figure out how that fits with our Western confidence in the inevitability of technological progress, and with the speeches that we Americans give from time to time about America as beginning over. My own thought on the matter is that when one scrutinizes actual proposals for beginning over, one sees that they are always highly selective. Though the Massachusetts Puritans wanted to begin over in many

ways, they carefully treasured their Bibles and the books of their favorite theologians.

VI

My line of thought, so far, has come in two main parts. First I called your attention to the enormous body of socially transcendent cultural artifacts available in contemporary Western society. Then I argued that this body of cultural artifacts is to be seen as the manifestation of what it is to be human, coupled with the emergence within certain societies of deep preservationist and eclectic impulses. Contemporary Western society is the paradigm example of such a society, with the result that available to you and me is an astoundingly rich heritage of the artifactual embodiments of humanity's interpretations, imaginings, and valuings. Liberal arts education, as I understand it, consists of inducting each new generation into that heritage, thereby also enabling each new generation both to pass on that heritage to the next, and to expand it by adding its own contribution.

Having arrived at this point in the argument, I could now bring it to a conclusion by inquiring into the worth of such engagement. Does its fundamental worth consist, for example, in the liberation from one's particularities that Oakeshott praises? I am dubious of that account. Though Oakeshott is pointing to something important, I think no one is ever freed from particularity. One's particularity may be expanded; the sort of "fusion of horizons" of which Gadamer speaks may take place. But the result is still particularity. Liberation from particularity strikes me as not the right way to describe what happens in liberal arts education.

But rather than offering an alternative to Oakeshott, I shall on this occasion decline the invitation to participate in the debate. The debate strikes me as having something of the artificial about it. I do not say that it is wrongheaded. I have myself participated in the debate over the worth of liberal arts education; I would not be surprised if I did so again in the future. If and when I do, I think that among other things I would want to say something about the importance of remembering, both individual and social, and about the ways in which memory is embodied in culture. But to repeat, I find something of the artificial about these discussions; and that is really the upshot of the line of thought I have sketched for you today.

Liberal arts education consists of inducting the student into our cultural heritage. To propose the abolition of such education amounts to proposing that that heritage be allowed to become a dead letter for us. And if it does become a dead letter for us, it will of course sooner or later decay, be forgotten, or disappear under the sand. But I have never come across anybody who really wants to live in a society of that sort. There have been such societies; traditional tribal societies were like that. But when I hear people waxing rhapsodic about life in a primeval society out in the wilderness, I notice that they always contemplate taking a few books along, and that they do not propose becoming amnesiacs concerning all they have come to know.

So to the person who professes skepticism concerning the worth of liberal arts education, I say, would you really want to live in a society in which the cultural heritage was minimal? Do you really want to cut yourself off entirely from the

cultural heritage of our own society? And in any case, whether you do or do not want to do that, it is impossible. Like it or not, liberal arts education, in some form or other, is inevitable for us. Of course much of it can occur outside formal education. And of course Shakespeare and Brahms and Ravi Shankar can be avoided. So we can discuss whether avoiding Shakespeare and Brahms and Ravi Shankar is a good thing or a bad thing. My own view on that matter is that it very much depends on the person. I am not one of those who thinks everybody ought to read Shakespeare, listen to Brahms, and so forth. But liberal arts education in some form or other is inevitable.

You have not heard me downplay doing. That is to say, you have not heard me downplay the importance of finding an occupation or profession in life and preparing for that. But such doing is not everything. There is also engaging the interpretations, the imaginings, the valuing, the enjoyings, of your and my predecessors in humanity's odyssey upon earth before God. That is what liberal arts education helps us to do; it enables that engagement.

Nobody really wants to avoid being inducted into our cultural heritage. You may not like the particular way you have been inducted. Many of the parts of the heritage to which you have been inducted you may not like. But nobody really wants liberal arts education to disappear. It is one of the most natural things on earth. Maybe it needs to be explained. But it hardly needs defending.

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