

In 1936, University of Chicago president Robert Maynard Hutchins published a slim volume entitled *The Higher Learning in America*. In it, Hutchins argued that higher education had fallen into incoherence, and was headed for tragedy and destruction (his actual words were “vocationalism, empiricism and disorder”) unless it turned from the path on which it had embarked—a path violating both the spirit and the letter of the liberal arts tradition (100). Hutchins also proposed a means to avert this disaster; a model of higher learning conceived as “the single-minded pursuit of the intellectual virtues” (32) and of “truth for its own sake” (33).

When Hutchins wrote *The Higher Learning*, he was thirty-seven years old and already had been president of Chicago for seven years. Even after seven years at the helm, the institution on which he sought to leave his mark bore the unmistakable stamp of another man, a man who had left the institution when Hutchins was still in knee pants.

That man had gone on to Columbia University where, some thirty years later, he was still teaching and publishing (voluminously) at the age of seventy-seven. His ideas could not have been more antithetical to Hutchins’s—and they had come to exert enormous influence on educational theory in this country. While Hutchins argued that truth “for its own sake” was a pure quantity that must be dispensed in an atmosphere uncontaminated by vocational interests, empirical sciences, or attention to current events, this philosopher understood “knowledge for its own sake” to be inextricably and valuably intertwined with “vocational knowledge,” both within higher education and in the larger society.

Thirty years after his departure from the University of Chicago, philosopher John Dewey was still a burr under Robert Maynard Hutchins’s saddle, still shaping curricular and pedagogical thinking at that institution.

When *The Higher Learning* was published, Dewey, predictably, reviewed it. This was not snide mean-spiritedness on Dewey’s part. Hutchins had written a high profile book about higher education that attacked ideas clearly identifiable as Dewey’s, or traceable to Dewey’s influence. He wrote a measured review, concurring that higher education was in a mess, but sharply disagreeing with Hutchins’s prescribed means for cleaning up that mess. (To his credit, he never once called Hutchins “young whippersnapper” or “snotnose kid.”) For a year, the two published increasingly vituperative essays debating Hutchins’s proposals. Their debate simmered for another eight years.

I dredge up the dispute between Dewey and Hutchins because this very public episode in an age-old debate about the nature of the liberal arts bears striking, potentially fruitful similarities to episodes in our own time. The debate over which studies properly belong in—or legitimately could be added to—the liberal arts is at least as old as liberal arts institutions—and probably as old as the codification of the trivium and quadrivium themselves. In fact, one could argue that it is as old as classical Athens. Plato worried about essentially this matter in the *Republic*, as did Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Indeed, both Hutchins and Dewey appealed to tradition—particularly to the ancients—in pleading their respective cases. But their views of that tradition—and of the lessons to take from it—differed significantly.

Hutchins emphasized the contents of the education proposed by the Greeks, but largely ignored its context—the fact that this was education for a particularly constituted citizen of a particular kind of democracy, who must be “liberated” from particular forms of intellectual bondage. In contrast, Dewey adopted the most general aims of Greek education—namely, that education ought to liberate students

and also prepare them for citizenship. He recognized that, just as the Greeks designed their education for a particular time and place, so too must we. It will not do to adopt the content of Greek education whole cloth, for they and we understand liberation and citizenship in some fundamentally different ways. Perhaps we can find insights in the Dewey/Hutchins exchange to guide our own work as liberal artisans.

Robert Maynard Hutchins: “Truth for Its Own Sake”

Hutchins conceives an unambiguous distinction between liberal learning (as he puts it, “knowing why”) and vocational learning (“knowing how”). Knowing why is the “pursuit of truth for its own sake,” while knowing how is merely “the preparation of men and women for their life work” (33). These aims are not simply different from each other, but directly antagonistic to each other. To pursue truth requires one to do nothing less than abandon one’s efforts to develop the roles that define our human lives—worker, citizen, family member, community participant (33). Such “vocational” studies, along with endeavors like “body building and character building,” “social graces and tricks of the trade” (77), current events and even empirical sciences, prevent one from searching for knowledge for its own sake. (The elimination of character building is rather surprising. One might expect Hutchins to subscribe to the widely-held view that the liberal arts are centrally concerned with building moral character—a view having its roots in Aristotle.) Vocational efforts thwart the project of liberal learning, either by failing to prioritize knowledge of the truth that is “everywhere the same” (66), or by denying that such truth even exists.

In both his critique of the current university and his proposal for reform, Hutchins hearkens back to the Greeks, and seeks to develop a system of education that embodies what he understands to be its virtues. He credits the Greek system of knowing for its centralizing of metaphysics, its emphasis on eternal truths, its distinction between immediate and final ends, and its distinction between liberal and servile arts.

Hutchins’s arguments may sound familiar. After all, he hardly represents the lunatic fringe. It is not crazy to argue that the liberal arts are the single-minded pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Hutchins simply elucidates a view of the liberal arts that is held (if not always explicitly) by many contemporary “purist” defenders of the liberal arts. I hear echoes of Hutchins in my friend, a 1940s graduate of Smith College, who decided to stop giving money to her alma mater because it instituted an engineering degree—a degree she regards as vulgarly vocational.

At my own institution (a liberal arts college that offers, in addition to the expected courses of study in the humanities and sciences, majors in finance, accounting, nursing, education, and athletic training), I hear, not infrequently, the harrumphing complaint that various departments don’t belong at this institution, because they’re not genuine parts of the liberal arts tradition. The problem? These majors are too practical/vocational/professional in their focus. While at least some of these maligned departments can reply by claiming squatters’ rights (they’ve been here longer than some traditional liberal arts departments, including my own), and while many can also identify specific ways in which their curricula fulfill Gustavus Adolphus College’s mission statement, it’s nevertheless true that they won’t be found on anyone’s list of “true” liberal arts disciplines. On a widely-held understanding of the liberal arts, the disciplines in that tradition stand in diametric opposition to the vocational and the practical; they are “useless”—and proud of it. Hutchins unquestionably stands on firm ground with his critique.

After hermetically sealing the liberal arts from all things vocational, Hutchins nevertheless finds himself defending their study on the basis of their deep and long-lasting utility—in other words, their value as preparation for, well, for life work and membership in the human community. True, there is nothing strictly inconsistent about Hutchins doing so. He is simply pointing out that, while utility oughtn’t be the aim of education, we can, fortuitously, achieve it by these means, so isn’t that a terrific bonus for your four years of effort?

Nevertheless, while it is not logically inconsistent, Hutchins's admission of the vocational utility of knowing for its own sake does point to the permeability of those two educational aims—and thus to an alternative understanding of the liberal arts tradition, an understanding that argues that the division between the “vocational/practical” and the “purely abstract/intellectual/theoretical” is not nearly so sharp as some of its defenders wish to claim. Advocates of this alternative perspective use very different criteria for deciding which studies do and don't “belong” in a liberal arts college—and come up with a rather different understanding of what belonging means. A more promising—and potentially liberatory—model of the liberal arts arises when we begin by understanding these aims—“knowing why” and “knowing how”—not as discrete and oppositional, but as deeply, fruitfully, humanly intertwined. Enter John Dewey.

John Dewey: The Instrumental and the Consummatory

To elucidate Dewey's vision of the liberal arts, I begin at a more general level, with his concept of human knowing. Knowing for Dewey must be understood as always emerging from, and responding to, a particular context—a time, a place, a problem, a situation. Knowing, furthermore, has both “instrumental” and “consummatory” facets—it aims at solving identifiable problems, and it is also potentially beautiful and worth contemplating. Any kind of knowing is like this, whether it be the study of recently-discovered ancient texts or the study of recently-uncovered ancient plumbing in your just-purchased house. Plunge into any inquiry, and you will find yourself, at various points, pursuing the answer to very practical questions (“why is there a drip in the living room ceiling?”) and also contemplating abstract, even profound matters that have no particular or immediate connection to any situation presently at hand (“is the water stain on my ceiling a work of art if its creation was accidental and not intentional?”).

My example is trivial; the point is not. The human activity of knowing is a complex, indissoluble mesh of consummatory knowing “for its own sake” and instrumental knowing, pursued for the sake of accomplishing some practical, concrete, or vocational aim. To attempt to saw, chisel, plow, winnow, or otherwise divide the instrumental and the consummatory into two conflictual endeavors, as Hutchins does, is a supremely paradoxical act. It is paradoxical because, upon making the division, one is then forced to turn around and explain the apparent paradox that abstract understandings regularly present themselves as useful solutions to all sorts of ordinary, day-to-day, practical problems we humans encounter. If we don't begin by dividing the instrumental from the consummatory, that paradox never materializes.

Dewey believes that this division, which Hutchins takes to be a foundational fact about the nature of knowledge, is more properly understood as an artifact of history, a reflection of the particular social organization of ancient Greek society, in which sharp divisions separated leisured citizens from those who served them. This social division, Dewey suggests, lies at the bottom of the Greek division between the instrumental and the consummatory. The liberal or “free” arts stand in direct contrast to the servile arts—those arts of making and doing that are the exclusive purview of slaves, servants, wives, and all those who are not free. Greek liberal education aimed to develop those consummatory intellectual capacities taken to be ends in themselves. For the Greeks, the employment of such intellectual powers was necessarily the activity of leisure; it was not to be taken up by someone whose life was manual labor. Indeed, it was a mark of the citizen's leisure—provided “courtesy” of the workers who served him—that he could pursue this higher order thinking. If we no longer adopt the Greek social distinction between leisured citizens and those who labor on their behalf, then we must also question this epistemological distinction.

Though Dewey rejects the Greek distinction between instrumental and consummatory, he nevertheless embraces certain of Aristotle's general educational aims: that education ought to 1) fit one for citizenship, and 2) liberate humans, enabling us to attain to the highest, broadest level of thinking, acting, and living possible in our world. As I've already suggested, the world for which we are being educated differs dramatically from the one for which Plato and Aristotle conceived their education.

Contemporary American conceptions of the nature of citizenship differ markedly from the Athenian model, on which the manual labor of the many freed up some few men—those called citizens—for lives of contemplation and reflection. So too does our understanding of liberation and its requirements differ from the Greeks'. Because the vocation of citizenship and the liberation it requires are the very goals at which Greek liberal education aimed, it stands to reason that we must retool the Greek model of education in light of our very different conceptions of these aims.

In the remainder of this essay, I suggest two preconditions upon which a Deweyan model of the liberal arts will rest. First, while Dewey and Aristotle agree that citizenship ought to be at the center of our educational enterprise, their fundamental disagreements with respect to the meanings of citizenship and leisure require that we significantly revise the Greek prescription for education—specifically, that we set aside the sharp division between liberal and servile arts. Second, we must reconceive human liberation in light of our particular context. A conception of liberation cannot be generic, but must address the fact that humans are prevented from intellectual flourishing in ways that are very particular to the societies they inhabit. It won't do for us to adopt whole cloth an understanding of liberation designed to free the intellectual capacities of the Greek citizen.

Citizenship: Different Concepts for Different Contexts

I've suggested that, when we embrace the Greek tradition out of which the liberal arts grew, we must also attend to the principles and presuppositions upon which it rested—including the social and political presumptions. Dewey's model of liberal learning does so. As a result, he takes from the Greeks a commitment to liberatory education for citizenship, but rejects those aspects of Greek education and Greek society that speak particularly to Greek conceptions of citizenship and liberation—and that fly in the face of his contemporary concept of democratic citizenship.

One important difference between Dewey and the Greeks lies in the fact that citizenship is no longer a full time occupation for most citizens of contemporary democracies, as it was in the democracy of which Plato wrote. Our democracies are not structured to require such a level of participation, and most of us don't have the wherewithal to make citizenship our job even if we wanted to. Our concept of liberal arts education must address the fact that, unlike those Athenian citizens, we are being educated for a world in which we are citizens, but also paid workers and home-keepers. In other terms, it must incorporate both instrumental and consummatory knowing.

In one respect, such a move represents a sharp departure from the Greek model. In mingling instrumental and consummatory knowing—the “practical” and the “for its own sake”—it mixes the work of citizen and slave in a manner Plato would find entirely unacceptable. (Hutchins, of course, also refuses this mixing; thus does he reject the suggestion that the “practical” could have any place in the liberal arts.) In another crucial respect, however, Dewey's model embodies the very spirit of Greek education. After all, Greek liberal education was deeply vocational. It trained students for the vocation of citizenship. Dewey's model embraces the Greek emphasis on education for citizens, but recognizes that the contemporary vocation of citizenship requires us to mix instrumental and consummatory knowing. A pure “for its own sake” education won't do the job for us (as it allegedly would have for a Greek citizen).

For Dewey, the interrelationship between vocational and liberal learning rests upon a fundamental epistemological relationship between the practical and the theoretical. As he puts the matter, “theory, properly understood, [has] a practical value and practice an intellectual function and content” (“Theory and Practice,” 354–55). This recognition, in turn, leads him to assert that there can be no sharp division between the vocational and the liberal—between work aimed at fulfilling basic human needs and that aimed at the highest intellectual achievements of which humans are capable.

In short, once we attend to the different conceptions of Greek and contemporary conceptions of citizenship, we must embrace a different understanding of the relationship between “pure” and

“instrumental” knowing—a difference that necessarily has an impact upon our understanding of the liberal arts.

In a society in which most all citizens also work at paying jobs, we need a distinctly “un-Greek” sense of vocation that integrates these activities and acknowledges their roles in citizens’ public lives. It would be the height of insanity to adopt a model of education that fitted one well for the life of a well-placed Athenian citizen—a model focused entirely on “knowledge for its own sake.” It would also be the height of stupidity to relegate mountains of workers to intellectual ignominy because they are “mere” laborers. We need a Deweyan sense of vocation that sees the two goals of education—the “for its own sake” and the “practical”—as intertwined.

A Deweyan understanding of the vocation of citizenship requires us to challenge the notion that the free citizen exercises the highest form of freedom when engaged in pure contemplation. In a society such as ours, why would this be the highest goal? While a liberal arts education ought to foster the highest level of thinking of which humans are capable, abstract contemplation undertaken at leisure may not (always, necessarily) constitute that highest level. The consummatory and contemplative might always be a component of our highest reasoning, but it won’t be the component that makes that reasoning the highest human achievement.

In our world, the distinction between labor and leisure—so sharp in the Athenian vision, and so implicated in the whole understanding of what liberal education is—loses its edges. Indeed, it loses its descriptive usefulness altogether in many contexts and becomes a downright hindrance. What does become—what should become—of the Greek veneration of knowledge “for its own sake” in a context in which the definitions of labor and leisure are much more interdependent? We defenders of the liberal arts tend to continue to venerate the notion of knowledge for its own sake—and to police the borders of our venues of “useless knowledge,” to make sure no one is doing anything to make it practical and thereby sully it. Some advocates of the liberal arts venerate this “good for nothing” aspect of the tradition above all other aspects.

But from Dewey’s perspective, a liberal arts education cannot afford to ignore the fact that labor and leisure, in our world, are deeply intertwined. As Dewey puts it in *Democracy and Education*:

While the distinction [between labor and leisure] is often thought to be intrinsic and absolute, it is really historical and social. It originated, so far as conscious formulation is concerned, in Greece, and was based upon the fact that the truly human life was lived only by a few who subsisted upon the results of the labor of others. The problem of education in a democratic society is to do away with the dualism and to construct a course of studies which makes thought a guide of free practice for all and which makes leisure a reward of accepting responsibility for service, rather than a state of exemption from it (270).

Perhaps a liberal arts education has a particular obligation to draw our eyes always higher, to the most abstract of our vocations—namely, to be human—but that occupation itself is in the end also always the most supremely practical one. Thus, it is “higher” not in the sense of being purer, but in the sense of being more important, and more universally important. But part of its importance lies precisely in its being so very “practical,” so relevant to the practices of our everyday lives.

The Liberal Arts as Liberating

The second element of this Deweyan alternative addresses the sense in which the liberal arts are liberating. While Greek education sought to liberate its citizens by freeing them from the twin dangers of ignorance and prejudice, a Deweyan conception must address our much different contemporary understanding of human liberation.

What becomes of the old link between education and citizenship in contemporary democracies, in which invidious, hierarchical restrictions on citizenship have slowly, incrementally fallen away? Freedom and

citizenship, in Athens, were conceived in relation to slavery and servitude. Dewey argues that this social distinction between the contemplative life of the free man and the manual work of the laborer who supported him became reified as a division “between a liberal education, having to do with the...life ...devoted to knowing for its own sake, and a useful, practical training for mechanical occupations, devoid of intellectual and aesthetic content” (*Democracy and Education*, 270). Such a division made sense in the Athenian democracy, where citizens could devote themselves to intellectual pursuits, secure in the knowledge that someone—someone prevented by birth from being a citizen—was taking care of dinner. Dinner-makers needed all and only practical training in dinner making; citizens needed education liberating them from ignorance and prejudice, preparing them for abstract thought at the highest level.

But how does such a model translate to a contemporary democracy such as the United States, a democracy that rejects, at least in principle, the distinction between free citizens and dinner-makers? What happens to the liberatory aims of liberal education, when we reject the very notion of inherent servitude and the concept of freedom that rests on it? Dewey asserts that we must change the very nature of the education, such that it does not encode the division between elite/leisure citizenship and brute/servile labor in the first place. The lives and work of citizens in the democracy to which we aspire would, ideally, be those of thoughtful dinner-makers, characterized by modes of knowing in which contemplation informs practical action, and action guides and grounds contemplation.

Everyone in such a democracy would need access to education that would prepare them to live lives of thoughtful practice. Or, as Dewey more eloquently puts the matter, “The present function of the liberal arts college, in my belief, is to use the resources put at our disposal alike by humane literature, by science, by subjects that have a vocational bearing, so as to secure ability to appraise the needs and issues of the world in which we live. Such an education would be liberating not in spite of the fact that it departs widely from the seven liberal arts of the medieval period, but just because it would do for the contemporary world what those arts tried to do for the world in which they took form” (“The Problem of the Liberal Arts College,” 280).

What, then, becomes of the liberal arts in a Deweyan picture? What is left of Hutchins’s tradition, of pure knowledge that gets thrown into the hurly burly of everyday life where it is forced to try to concentrate while vocational knowing has its radio cranked up too loud? Something very important—something that has in fact lain at the heart of liberal learning since its germination in ancient Athens. What remains when we reunite knowing how and knowing that, is the recognition that a liberal arts education ought to liberate us, and enable us to contribute to the liberation of others. I can think of no greater wish for students of the liberal arts than that they depart their undergraduate institutions as skilled “liberal artisans,” prepared to continue their inquiries wherever they might take them, but always attentive to the ways, large and small, that their work as thoughtful practitioners might contribute to the liberation of others.

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