

Liberal Education and a Way of Life

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In responding to Kevin Gary I would say that there is much in his essay with which I agree and am in sympathy. However I will question Gary's notion of a liberal education before expanding upon his main thesis, namely that the formative aspect of a liberal education has been ignored in education.

Gary claims that a "liberal education proposes rich possibilities for what an education ought to be...[as] part of its appeal is...an education for freedom typically through the acquisition of critical thinking skills necessary for the attainment of individual autonomy." However he protests that classically understood liberal education included a formative dimension, that has become reduced to a limited perspective concerned merely with critical thinking skills.

But are we clear as to the meaning of "liberal" and whether liberalism is a philosophical or a political doctrine? As Gary says that he is using Pierre Hadot's notion of "philosophy as a way of life" interchangeably with "liberal education as a way of life," I will consider liberalism as a philosophical doctrine only. But this may not help in conceiving liberal education as a *particular way of life*, as Gary later suggests. The problem is that liberalism is a contested philosophical (and political) doctrine. This problem will be developed below.

First, I am not sure from my reading of Hadot that Gary can identify his notion of philosophy as a way of life with liberal education as a way of life. For example Hadot says:

For the Stoics, the parts of philosophy — physics, ethics, and logic — were not, in fact, parts of philosophy itself, but rather parts of philosophical *discourse*. By this they meant that when it comes to teaching philosophy, it is necessary to set forth a theory of logic, a theory of physics, and a theory of ethics. The exigencies of discourse, both logical and pedagogical, require that these distinctions be made. But philosophy itself — that is, the philosophical way of life — is no longer a theory divided into parts, but a unitary act, which consists in *living* logic, physics and ethics...we simply speak and think well...We no longer theorize about moral action, but we act in a correct and just way.¹

Clearly Hadot draws a distinction between studying and theorizing philosophy and adopting "the philosophical way of life," though the former may be part of the latter. Liberal education involves the study and theorizing of liberal values and positions, the outcome of which presumably would be the adoption of (hopefully) liberalism as a way of life. There rests, however, the gap between theory and practice. For Hadot, Gary notes, philosophy as a way of life involved not an outcome of liberal learning but instead the existential choice of this way of living. It preceded the study "as an existential choice that was in reaction to other existential possibilities." It is this gap which Gary attempts to bridge with Kierkegaard.

In the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) the term "liberal," "originally was the distinctive epithet of those 'arts' or 'sciences' considered 'worthy of a free man;

opposed to servile or mechanical.”² The first entry for this use of “liberal” is dated 1375. “Liberalism” is said by J. Salwyn Shapiro to have originated in Spain in the early nineteenth century as the name of a political party — *liberales* — that advocated constitutional government.³ The OED says of liberalism that it means “the political tenets of a liberal” (1819).⁴ The terms “liberal” and “liberalism” must be used carefully in applying them retrospectively. I have some concerns then when Gary identifies ancient philosophy with liberal learning. It was philosophy and essentially Socratic philosophy that Hadot saw as a way of life. An historical approach to the notion of a liberal education is important but it would be a mistake to see this as a linear progressive development. The term “liberal education” applied to Socrates (Plato) does not have the same reference as modern notions of liberal education: philosophy and liberal arts learning. The words “liberal education” refer to different concepts in different periods (as does, for example, the word “atom”).

Second, Sir Isaiah Berlin held a pluralist position toward liberalism and liberal values. In one of his discussions of liberalism Berlin gave this list of liberal values: “liberty, equality, property, knowledge, security, practical wisdom, purity of character, sincerity, kindness, rational self-love.”⁵ However, Berlin did not believe in either Enlightenment views that harmony between competing liberal values could be attained or that human perfectibility was possible in practice. Berlin raised these issues in “Herder and the Enlightenment”:

What is the best life for men? And, more particularly, what is the most perfect society?

There is, after all, no dearth of solutions. Every age has provided its own formulae...in sacred books or in revelation or in the words of inspired prophets or the tradition of organized priesthoods; others found it in the rational insight of the skilled metaphysician, or in the combination of scientific experiment and observation...in the “natural” good sense of men not “scribbled over” by philosophers or theologians, or perverted by “interested error”...[or that]...only trained experts could discover great and saving truths...But one assumption was common to all these views: that it was, at any rate common in principle, possible to draw some outline of the perfect society or the perfect man, if only to define how far a given society or a given individual fell short of the ideal.⁶

Berlin believed that experience over several centuries had shown that there were irresolvable conflicts between human ideals and values, resulting in competing and often violent practices. So we must learn how to live with pluralistic and potentially competing values, because there are no agreed upon criteria for ranking or prioritizing these values. Therefore as the pursuit of one value, say freedom from, may conflict with justice, constraints may need to be placed upon the former. No one value, including negative freedom which he defended so strongly, could be of ultimate value.⁷ According to philosopher John Gray:

Pluralism of the kind Berlin defended so eloquently is more potentially subversive than he imagined. It undermines all universal moralities, including liberal moralities. It may be that the true upshot of Berlin’s pluralism is not liberalism but instead an ideal of basic decency.⁸

If Berlin is correct, there can be no one universal set of liberal values to guide or become an outcome for liberal education. It would seem there might be as many versions of liberal education as those liberal values that aspire to absolute or universal value(s). But, as Kevin Gary claims, a liberal education based upon

knowledge and critical thinking skills (only) has “won the day,” and the formative aspect has been ignored. At best the formative aspect has been reduced to critical thinking skills that can be directed in thought only towards the formation of the individual. The theory/practice gap remains. Gary puts this issue forcefully towards the end of his paper.

Thus what needs to be communicated is not knowledge but the awakening of ethical capabilities — an edifying joust to ethical action. This though, requires art rather than science, for the “object of the communication is...not a knowledge but a realization.” Direct communication about ethical matters, communicated scientifically, is a misunderstanding which gives the reader one more thing to *know*, but fails to communicate the earnest truth of existing into ethical categories. More knowledge, Kierkegaard says, is only a diversion.

In conclusion I would suggest that a core problem in philosophy of education, since at least the writings of R.S. Peters and Israel Scheffler, is the conception of education as a fundamentally epistemological concept. This results in the misunderstandings identified by Gary. Yet the pursuit of knowledge is but one liberal value amongst others. If education were conceived as an ethical concept, then in a liberal education the pursuit of knowledge could be one value amongst others only; for example ethics, literature, and the performing arts.

1. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 266–7.

2. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., s.v. “liberal.”

3. J. Salwyn Shapiro, *Liberalism: Its Meaning and History* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1958), 9.

4. *Oxford English Dictionary*, “liberalism.”

5. Sir Isaiah Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, quoted in John Gray, “The Case for Decency,” *New York Review of Books*, July 13, 2006, 20.

6. Isaiah Berlin “Herder and the Enlightenment,” in *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: Pimlico, 2000), 232 (gender use in original).

7. Isaiah Berlin, *Freedom and its Betrayal*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

8. Gray, “Case for Decency,” 20–2.