

Is Liberalism Liberally Educative?

René V. Arcilla
New York University

Kenneth Strike and Ben Endres cast disturbing light on the tension between political liberalism and liberal education. Rather than naturally fitting together a learning and a society, “liberal,” it starts to seem, marks their incongruity. After reviewing their views, I shall briefly argue that this tension is more like a flat out contradiction than Strike and Endres appear to appreciate. Perhaps I am more troubled by it because I am less convinced that liberalism provides the best, most useful language for understanding our social problems. In any case, I will try to explain my concern that liberalism may actually impede, rather than enable, the development of a liberally educative society.

Strike trenchantly captures the tension in the two central theses of his paper. Liberal education is illiberal, he first asserts. By “liberal education,” he means an education formed by a principled commitment to a certain ideal, that of human flourishing. Although he is not particular about the educational practices generated by this commitment — for example, whether they involve the study of Great Books, or the inclusion of dance instruction — he does require that these practices be strictly rationalizable in terms of this ideal. Practices whose meaning and value is primarily instrumental for other ends are thus ruled out. Now what makes this education illiberal, in the sense of being opposed to the tenets of political liberalism, is that it violates the latter’s neutrality about the good. “Human flourishing” is no vacuous term; it implies substantive claims, however general, about what is essentially good for human beings, such as the intrinsic value of the examined life. A liberal education advocates this value, among others, and those who sympathize with contrary values will be right to feel illiberally imposed on. The favor given to liberal education by the liberal state, in their view, calls into question the latter’s consistency and justice.

So there is a tension between the good pushed by liberal education and political liberalism’s noncommittal pluralism regarding comprehensive conceptions of the good: liberalism should not support liberal education, liberal education is a problem for liberalism. Perhaps, though, this tension can be smoothed out with a little give-and-take. Strike’s second thesis is that this will be forbiddingly difficult. He takes up Tomasi’s notion of tax-flattening as a way of compensating for the burdens that a liberal culture places on certain groups, and considers whether an arrangement of this type might ease the strain that a liberal education sponsored by a liberal society would put on groups committed to goods that run counter to that of human flourishing. Without conclusively rejecting this maneuver, he points out how hard it would be to bring it off. Such a liberal education is bound to conflict with very different groups, calling for a number of unwieldy compensatory arrangements that are unlikely to be satisfying. He illustrates this by focusing on the reasonable complaints of fundamentalists and philistines. The illiberality of liberal education, it turns out, has repercussions too serious to be patched up with a few cost-benefit tradeoffs.

Strike's discerning formulation of the tension between liberal education and liberal political philosophy is quite convincing. It is a tension, however, based in theory on a conflict of ideals. Endres perceptively underlines this in explaining his reservations regarding Strike's argument. Strike, as we have seen, makes commitment to the ideal of human flourishing definitive for liberal education. However, Endres observes that actually existing liberal education, particularly as it is currently practiced in the public schools, does not in fact appear to be motivated by this ideal. It is more akin to Strike's instrumentalist curriculum. Strike acknowledges that a curriculum that "emphasizes the instrumental uses of practices...is the one most likely to accommodate both the fundamentalists and the philistines." Accordingly, Endres finds in this reason for optimism.

Strike characterizes the instrumental curriculum in the following way:

You may come to internalize some of the non-instrumental goods associated with intellectual practices...Or not. We allow this but political liberalism does not require it." Strike rejects this way of thinking about liberal learning because it "externalizes the goods of practices." Yet, this is the most that schooling can do in a liberal society.... All we can say is: "Practicing this discipline is likely to make you more marketable and may help you to live a richer life; ideally it will do both, but there is some chance it might not do either." This approach is instrumental in Strike's language, but it maintains an appeal to the value of human flourishing, although in a weaker or more indirect way.

Endres encourages us to affirm the instrumentalist nature of actually existing liberal education as a good thing. Although it weakens the commitment to human flourishing, it makes this education more widely acceptable to non-liberals. If we conceive of liberal education as responding to a number of needs rather than to a single telos, then, that education would pose less of a problem for, and be more compatible with, political liberalism.

Much of my own response to Strike takes its cue from Endres's stress on the perfectionism of Strike's vision of liberal education. This vision is concerned less with adapting to the complexities of a given society than with building a utopia based on a moral ideal. I agree with Endres that if we were not so idealistic about this education, we would not have to worry so much about illiberality. However, being unlike Endres drawn to this idealism — because I believe, with Stanley Cavell, that democracy should have a perfectionist point¹ — I find myself distanced from Strike in the opposite direction. That is, Endres finds that he is worrying too much about the tension between liberal education and liberalism, while I am disconcerted that he is evidently worrying too little. If one were committed to the good of human flourishing, then how could one countenance a society that systematically marginalizes that good? And a political philosophy that obscures this? I was surprised that in his conclusions about what to do about the tension, Strike concentrated on recommendations to refine and limit the rationale for liberal education, and did not raise any questions about liberalism's capacity to nurture and support our educational hopes.

Such questions stand out more vividly if we consider not only extant liberal education, but actually existing liberal culture. Much of this culture, as reflected in Strike's and Endres's discussion, is preoccupied with the ideological opposition of fundamentalists, the West's Great Satan. That these latter are also liable to be

unhappy with an ethic of human flourishing lends weight to the sense that liberalism and liberal education share a common cause. However, Strike, to his credit, acknowledges that there is another group who is bound to be vexed by any serious insistence on this ideal: the philistines. What he does not emphasize enough is that the philistines can hardly be characterized, even by their enemies, as marginal, medieval holdovers. Rather, philistinism *is* the culture of actually existing liberalism, to the extent that the latter historically gives aid and comfort to capitalism. If you cannot prise capitalism from liberalism, then neither can you prise philistinism from it, and a liberal education in Strike's and my sense, regardless of the ceremonial words of respect, will never be truly welcome in it.

Let me try to illuminate why by more clearly defining philistinism. It appears to me that there are two, tightly related varieties. The first, as Strike notes, refers to the tendency to value nothing more than the pursuit of power and status, particularly economic. The Romantic movement in the arts, as well as writers like Flaubert and Woolf, Nietzsche and Freud, have given us sensitive and critical accounts of how this ethic became dominant in the liberal bourgeoisie, and so deadened our capacity for experience and critical reflection. The second variety refers to the tendency to value the consumption of distraction. This ethic is central to our mass culture of the spectacle, and critics such as Adorno, Clement Greenberg, and T.J. Clark have explained how modernism emerged in resistance to it.² Such art struggles to keep aesthetic, educative values from being subsumed under commercial and ideological ones, ones that ultimately serve the interests of philistines in the first sense. All this is now pretty standard cultural history; the point is that these two kinds of philistinism are clearly linked, and together have succeeded in putting the arts, and their liberally educative ideal of human flourishing, under constant threat. Selling out has become part of an artist's expected mortality. Everyone takes it for granted that most works addressed to a mass audience are as nourishing for the mind as junk food is for the body.

Our actually existing, philistine culture of liberalism is a poisonous environment for an idealistic liberal education. Just try to imagine a contemporary Minister of Culture — already a stretch for some of us who live in certain countries — delivering an address to the nation that explains that because there is just so much insightful, challenging, elevating, conversation-stimulating work in television, movies, radio, magazines, and other media, special compensation will now have to be made to the philistine minority that is discriminated against by all this excellence. No, it is surely unsurprising, as Endres observed, that the public schools that serve our real-life majorities can manage only compromised versions of liberal education. Like Strike, I want to encourage liberal learners and educators to aspire to something higher and more demanding, and to take up anew the ongoing, Socratic task of persuading skeptics that liberal learning is essential to our humanity. But this also entails taking a critical look at our current political culture, and how much it has turned against Mill's project of building a marketplace of *ideas*. Today, liberal learning may very well mean becoming an active participant in the politics of this contradiction.

1. See Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

2. See, among other works, Theodor Adorno, *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (New York: Continuum, 1985); Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Frascina (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 21-33; T.J. Clark, "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art," in Frascina, *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, 54-63; and T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).