

Friends, Foes, and Nel Noddings on Liberal Education

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Those of us who champion liberal education have been embattled in recent years, facing a fusillade of criticism. The critiques, which range from the scholarly and philosophical to the polemical and sloganeering, arrive in two varieties: one aimed at practice, the other at theory.

Let us call the first sort “narratives of decline.”¹ They decry the fallen state of liberal education, identify performance gaps, pinpoint causes, and commend pathways to renewal. Undoubtedly, there are woeful failures, degradations, and perversions of practice in liberal education — although I might say defensively that any complex, institutionalized practice will display regrettable, sometimes even shocking, performance gaps. These critiques, however, are usually jeremiads, bemoaning *widespread* and *systemic* degradations. The putative etiology varies, from the abandonment of worthy curricular content to the failure to address the right questions, from the dominance of utilitarian concerns to the triumph of the research ethos, but the pronouncement is the same: the ideal is sound, but everywhere we are failing it, and the practice of liberal education is in decline.² Usually, I find it difficult to embrace these worried “friends” of liberal education, because I disagree with their diagnosis of the problem or its supposed scale, because I reject their salvational vision of liberal education, or because their gloom seems willfully to ignore the everyday educational successes that bloom under their noses on their local campuses.

The second sort of critique is ultimately more unsettling: these critics find the ideal of liberal education itself to be fatally flawed. Though they typically share a “hermeneutics of suspicion,”³ here too there is seldom analytical concurrence: postmodernism alone has many arrows in its quiver. Whatever the ground and direction of the critique, however, these critics, when they turn constructive, advocate something different, not a faithful recommitment to a tarnished ideal. The catalogue of their proposals ranges from a prosthetic supplement to liberal education to its wholesale replacement with a distinctly different paradigm.⁴ Unable to give each line of criticism its deserved scrutiny here, I propose instead to examine one such critic as representative — someone whose work commands philosophical and educational respect; someone who has proclaimed “straight-out” that liberal education is neither the best education for everyone nor, indeed, for anyone; someone who advances “an alternate vision”: Nel Noddings.⁵ Though I focus tightly on two pertinent passages by one author, my comments will occasionally redound upon the cluster of such critiques.

GREAT BOOKS, COWBOYS, AND IMMORTAL QUESTIONS

In an interesting article titled “Conversation as Moral Education,” Noddings examines three types of conversation, including “the Immortal Conversation” offered through liberal education. Exploring its moral possibilities, she alludes to the

“narratives of decline” but places herself (or so it seems initially) in the more radical camp. I quote her at length, both to give her voice and to provide the textual basis for commentary:

When some people today deploy the loss of traditional liberal education, many of us react with some confusion. We do not think that studying the Great Books or any other canon will necessarily make our students better people, and we reject the haughtiness of those who think their knowledge is Knowledge. However, confusion arises because the questions raised in traditional liberal studies still seem central to human life. We feel that education — real education — cannot neglect the questions, Where do I stand in the world? What has my life amounted to? What might I become? ... What is the meaning of life? Is there a God? What is my place in the universe?

It is true that these questions arise and are explored in impressive ways in the great works associated with liberal education, but they may also be asked and explored in other settings. Zane Grey’s cowboys ask them while riding the range under starry skies. Old ladies in their rocking chairs, shelling peas or knitting, ask them as the evening cuts off the light of a summer day. Lone fishermen standing on rocky jetties in the Atlantic twilight ask them. Moreover, studying what great thinkers have said about immortal questions is no guarantee that one will be more honest, decent, loving or even open-minded. Without mentioning names, I can easily think of four or five superbly educated persons (all of whom deplore the condition of the American mind) who are themselves incapable of hearing or responding generously to views that differ from their own. Again we have a performance gap.

Thus I believe a grave mistake is made when we argue for the traditional liberal studies as the arena in which immortal conversations must take place. Specialization has killed much of what was liberal in liberal studies.... But the questions remain, and teachers today should muster the courage to discuss them.⁶

Notice first that Noddings characterizes “traditional liberal education” as “studying the Great Books.” This identification enables a fallacy that is common among critics: they take (or mistake) a particular conception of liberal education for the concept itself. They attack (often cogently and convincingly) an influential conception of liberal education, like that of John Henry Newman or Robert Maynard Hutchins, or a particular historical institutionalization, like the Victorian university or the Paidaeia Proposal, and then fallaciously imply or assume they have vanquished the concept of liberal education. It is as though one were to criticize John Rawls’ theory of justice or the American judiciary, and conclude that the ideal of justice itself is therefore defective. If it is wrong to equate the concept of liberal education with one of its interpretations or iterations, it is also egregious to reduce it to a specific curriculum or pedagogy — or even to a theory of curriculum or pedagogy. Liberal education is more than Great Books Programs or Oxbridge tutorials.

Significantly, although Noddings rejects the Great Books approach, she does acknowledge that liberal education asks (or once asked) truly important questions — the questions “real education ... cannot neglect.” But immediately she focuses on the *setting* in which these questions arise, contrasting the implicitly invoked traditional classroom and its students with idyllic images of adults in nature who pose these same questions. This move embodies, I believe, another critical mistake: perhaps because they think of liberal education as a curricular or pedagogical theory, many critics identify it only with a didactic classroom. But liberal education happens in context; it is shaded by place and time, and colored by a community of learners, a cocurriculum, a “hidden curriculum,” and an institutional setting. Today, liberal

education frequently involves experiential, collaborative, and service learning; the boundaries of the classroom have become increasingly porous as, with technology, classes evolve into 24/7 learning communities. Any adequate theory must incorporate these salient aspects of liberal education that complement classroom instruction; it is a distortion to isolate the classroom as the sole element of a liberal education.

THE TRADITION OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

My reactions create an obligation: I need to “ante up” and explain what I mean by “liberal education” if neither any of its iterations, nor a theory of curriculum or pedagogy, nor the classroom per se. What is the ideal of liberal education? In fact, I think it best to shed the notion of a Platonic ideal and to speak instead of a tradition. Liberal education is a perdurable and influential tradition of educational theory and practice traceable to the Classical cultures of Greece and Rome. In its long evolution, it has adapted to emergent social, intellectual, and technological developments — and has, in turn, shaped them, being a continuous, fecund well-spring of culture and for academic life. It has spawned many conceptions and institutionalized forms, and numerous theories of curriculum and pedagogy. To view it as a tradition allows us to honor its historicity, its internal dynamism and tensions, its openness to alteration, and the diverse, particular ways in which its practice is situated.

But how are we to identify this tradition if not iteratively? My preference is to characterize it in the Aristotelian manner: by its *aims*. Liberal education is supremely aimed at *the good life*; it pursues the articulation of a compelling vision of a good life, along with the preparation for and cultivation of such a life. The “breadth” that is often associated with liberal education is in the first instance the breadth of its normative concern: the activity of living a human life and one’s life as a whole. Within the tradition, four orientations or approaches have arisen, each beginning a cascade of interpretive specificity by elevating a subsidiary aim: the transmission of culture, self-actualization, the understanding of the world, and normative engagement with the world. These four are polarities of educational theory and practice; they advance and recede, compete and blend, creating much of the historical dynamism of liberal education. Penultimately, they are complementary: the pursuit of one inevitably leads to another; ultimately, they all serve the supreme aim of discerning and living a good life. In this context, it is noteworthy that Noddings has herself endorsed a focus on educational aims and advocated a program that promotes caring relationships and happiness as definitive of a good life.⁷

Frustrated critics might even now interrupt to argue that the “good life” is a term that: (a) connotes an elitist, aristocratic life; (b) tends toward arid, rational theorizing, lacking passion or caring relationships; (c) is presented as *the good life* — one prescriptive, hegemonic, and likely sexist vision of what life should be; or (d) presumes both the moral authority of educators and the righteousness of their lessons and methods. I fully concur that these criticisms are valid for some versions of liberal education; a few iterations are no doubt vulnerable to all of them — but these critiques fail to pierce to the profound concerns that inspire the tradition. To explain why this is so, I must annotate my key terms. To “pursue the articulation of a

compelling vision of the good life” need not imply the apprehension of a preexisting ideal; part of the process of liberal education is the struggle to develop such a vision, a dialectical process in which the vision is both found and formed. Moreover, this task does not terminate with the completion of a course or a degree: it is life-long, generated and sustained by a self-conscious concern for the good life and one’s life as a whole. Advocates of liberal education may stand with Socrates (and Noddings) rather than with Plato and “reject the haughtiness of those who think their knowledge is Knowledge.” Furthermore, the telic phrase, “the good life,” need not designate a singular, universal vision; we might anticipate highly diverse, even contrasting, visions of a good life, which converse with each other. We may develop conceptions of liberal education that are democratic rather than aristocratic; that require the cultivation of emotions and relationships as well as intellect; that include experiential learning and encourage practical engagement; that are gender sensitive and culturally pluralistic, alert to issues of race and class; and that avoid indoctrination. (These possibilities are precisely those that are ascendant among contemporary trends in liberal education.) With these elucidations, I now return to the parsing of Noddings’s claims.

PARSING NODDINGS’S CLAIMS

(1) Although Noddings admits that the profound questions of life “arise and are explored in impressive ways in the great works associated with liberal education,” she does not believe “that studying the Great Books or any other canon will necessarily make our students better people.” As corroborating evidence, she cites good people who are not highly literate and literate people who lack certain moral qualities. Noddings judges this “a performance gap,” claiming that the moral education attempted (if it is) is ineffective, but she seems in fact to doubt that any program of moral education based on the explication of texts — whatever texts — would succeed.

Fair enough. She is surely correct that one orientation within the liberal education tradition — the cultural transmission approach — advocates the study of the human experience encoded in texts of various kinds, partly as a means to moral education: classic texts may convey cultural norms, provide vivid moral exemplars, and offer object lessons. Likely of greater salience are traditional claims that serious engagement with such texts both requires and develops essential moral capacities and skills — by enlarging the scope of moral imagination, deepening empathy through vicarious subjectivity, and increasing sensitivity to relevant particulars. These are, in principle, empirical claims, but difficult to prove and much contested. Interestingly, many educators, in recent years, borrowed the truth of these claims to critique the traditional curriculum: they argued that in order truly to enlarge a student’s moral imagination in a global society, we must expand the range of voices and cultures whose legacy is transmitted. Those reformers (with whom I identify) have largely succeeded, and the heritage of works students typically encounter now is noticeably more inclusive. Noddings, however, remains unconvinced that any canon, however constructed, would moralize its students. At this point, my response is twofold: (a) first, we should, in the spirit of epistemic humility, admit that

there is no foolproof method of moralization, one that eliminates failures or lapses. (b) Raising our sights from a particular curriculum (Great Books) or pedagogy (explication of texts), we should recall that cultural transmission is but one strand in the liberal education tradition; these strands supplement and correct each other; they are intertwined, and we cannot fully and fairly judge the tradition by one strand in isolation.

(2) Noddings observes that these questions “central to human life ... may also be asked and explored in other settings.” She paints three lyrical images: “Zane Grey’s cowboys ask them while riding the range under starry skies. Old ladies in their rocking chairs, shelling peas or knitting, ask them as the evening cuts off the light of a summer day. Lone fishermen standing on rocky jetties in the Atlantic twilight ask them.” From these vignettes she draws a forceful conclusion: “I believe a grave mistake is made when we argue for the traditional liberal studies as the arena in which immortal conversations must take place.”

Her concern seems to have shifted from the problem of ineffectiveness (performance gaps) in moral education to the arrogance of exclusivity, that is, to the haughty presumption that *only* in the setting of liberal education and the radiance of great texts can transformative “immortal conversations” take place. It is not evident whose claim this is, but Noddings makes a plausible charge; sorting out the issues it raises will require patience. To begin, it is not surprising that questions “central to human life” would arise outside the classrooms of liberal education, or even without encounters with great texts; indeed that is likely given the vital, universal questions they are. I would rephrase Noddings’s conclusion: It would be a grave mistake to believe that the ultimate concerns of liberal education are confined to situations of privilege and comfort, to scholarly explications of canonical texts. Concern for one’s life and its best prospects may arise in reflective solitude, amidst poverty, in despair, when resplendent ideals of the good life have been shattered — even after great horror.⁸ Second, we should be clear, however, that *asking the question* is only the first, albeit critical, step toward understanding — and it is a long way from answering it. Certainly it matters that Zane Grey’s cowboys and old ladies in their rockers and lone fishermen pose such questions; but it also matters what resources — intellectual, emotional, and spiritual — they possess to reflect on, refine, understand, and answer such questions. Liberal learning is precisely aimed at enhancing one’s resources for that purpose.⁹ But here, in the third place, we arrive at a fateful three-way fork in understanding Noddings’s claims. One path is to interpret her as claiming that it is only the posing of such questions reflectively that matters. That seems improbable given the connection she implies between these questions and being a moral person; the reflective moment must lead to something. A second path suggests that Noddings is simply observing that liberal learning may occur outside formal education, that one does not require a liberal arts degree to experience such learning. That would constitute a welcomed jibe at academic snobbery and moral elitism, and a further admonition to be humble in our learning. While formal education has advantages of efficiency, confirmation, community, and intensity, it is certainly possible for liberal learning — that is, learning

undertaken with the aim of articulating and cultivating a good life — to be pursued informally. Noddings does not, however, foresee such pursuits for the folks in her examples (though she does commend “ordinary conversation”); in fact, their brief portraits suggest otherwise. Besides, that path would lead us back to liberal education anyway. Which leaves only the third path: Noddings may be saying that liberal learning simply does not matter for engaging immortal questions: being a good person doesn’t require liberal learning at all. Since this seems the most plausible interpretation, I will examine it further.

Clearly, much depends on what we pack into the notion of a “good person.” One can elicit an array of models of the good person from different ethical theories, yet they have common elements: all involve the exercise of morally relevant capacities and skills, the expression of salient traits of character and moral agency, commitment to values that guide conduct, and moral understanding. These are desiderata of a moral education, and acquiring them requires something beyond merely growing up as a human being. Still, however one further delineates these elements, one might believe — as Noddings apparently does — that it is possible for an individual to acquire them sans schooling, even without informal liberal learning, but from other features of lived experience, such as special relationships or transformative experiences or unusually penetrating self-reflection. That it is *possible* to do so, of course, does not mean it is *probable* or *desirable*. The events of lived experience may change people for the worse as well as for the better, producing qualities that are dysfunctional for or inhibitive of desired moral elements; without purposefulness or structure, normative learning occurs only by happenstance. Must I justify the advantages of purposeful education over incidental learning? Furthermore, it seems to me that Noddings underplays the importance of moral understanding.

How important to becoming a good person is moral understanding? Most of us, I surmise, reject the extreme Socratic position that moral understanding is everything, that virtue *is* knowledge, and lean toward the Aristotelian view that moral and intellectual virtues are distinct, that good judgment (practical reasoning) is required, and that one must negotiate debilitating factors like weakness of will and moral luck.¹⁰ But Aristotle never claimed that knowledge is irrelevant to virtue, that right action and feeling are utterly divorced from moral understanding. Concede that, given different metaethical commitments, we may differ in how we specify needed “moral understanding”: our “good person” may need to understand other people, other cultures, ethical principles, the consequences of actions and policies, applicable moral maxims, power relationships or the morally salient particulars of situations, and so on. These, in turn, require the enlargement of moral imagination, the refinement of judgment, the development of empathy, the education of the emotions, and so forth. Nonetheless, in Noddings’s spirit, we might ask: Can we not acquire such understanding from direct experience — during starry nights on the range, or while shelling peas or twilight fishing? Surely, we realize that firsthand experience is more effective for changing minds than the mediated experience of instruction? But beyond the inefficiency and unpredictability of effects, the problem is that experience is never pure and unmediated. As John Dewey was forever

reminding us, the meaning one can derive from an experience is fundamentally dependent on what one brings to that experience, and what we bring includes our memory, skills, character, attitudes, capacities, and our understanding. Learning matters, and previous learning funds future learning. All starry nights on the range are not created equal.

Deepening one's moral understanding may not require formal liberal education, but I believe it does entail liberal learning. If one — anyone: cowboy, old lady, or scholar — engages any of the “central questions” of human life seriously, one goes beyond merely posing them to seek understanding. Suppose, in a philosophical moment, I am moved to ask, “What is the meaning of life?” or “What is my place in the universe?” To purposefully think through the question requires that I explore alternative responses, weigh implications, discern ambiguities, refine formulations, and develop a deeper sense of myself and “life” or “the universe.” I must, that is, undertake the tasks of liberal learning. Learning what other thoughtful humans discovered and concluded (the cultural transmission approach) may enrich my thinking; so may comprehending aspects of the universe (the understanding the world approach); I may need a clearer mind, sharper skills, or refined sensibilities, or find that all this reflection is changing me (the self-actualization approach); or that I need to act on my conclusions (the engagement with the world approach). To pursue my immortal question is to reach out for moral understanding through liberal learning.

FRIEND OR FOE?

In a related article (a year later), Noddings wrote:

I have argued that liberal education (defined as a set of traditional disciplines) is an outmoded and dangerous model of education for today's young. The popular slogan today is, All children can learn. To insist, however that all children should get the same dose of academic English, social studies, science, and mathematics invites an important question not addressed by the sloganeers: *Why* should children learn what we insist they “can” learn? Is this the material people really need to live intelligently, morally, and happily? Or are arguments for traditional liberal education badly mistaken? Worse, are they perhaps mere political maneuverings?

She explains that she is not attacking the disciplines as such. Rather, her argument is directed:

first, against an ideology of control that forces all students to study a particular, narrowly prescribed curriculum devoid of content they might truly care about. Second, it is an argument in favor of greater respect for a wonderful range of human capacities now largely ignored in schools. Third, it is an argument against the persistent undervaluing of skills, attitudes, and capacities traditionally associated with women.¹¹

Here and in later writings, she adopts “a set of traditional disciplines” as the relevant description of liberal education — a shift that is unexplained.¹² But again, her argument treats a particular curricular theory as if it were the concept of liberal education. As I read this, Noddings is advocating two reforms: (1) different educational content, in which capacities and skills usually ignored or undervalued are included; and (2) greater individualization of curricular options for students, replacing a prescribed, singular program of study. These seem wise and I might sign

on. But there is something else at work: she seems to doubt whether study of these disciplines is necessary for, or even relevant to, a good life — to living life “intelligently, morally, and happily.” It is true that when you ask the question, “Is this really the material people need?” it is difficult to answer “yes” if you focus on a specific lesson: *Can't I live a good life without knowing about photosynthesis or the Odyssey or the capital of Tibet or the quadratic equation?* Only an awkward stretch links such lessons to a good life. And yet, if you ask what material people need to live “intelligently, happily, and morally,” it is not such a stretch to affirm that people would need to understand what life is, what people have made and might make of the world, and what forces shape our lives — though that may not be the *only* material they need. The punctuated bouts of learning that these require may perhaps come unbidden and by accident, but that possibility seems a poor substitute for seeking them purposefully through disciplined study.

My argument, in summary, is that while one might well find fault with any particular historical conception, the tradition of liberal education — characterized by its distinctive aims — is a dynamic, evolving matrix of educational theory and practice; that it attempts to encapsulate in iterative programmatic forms a type of learning essential for sustained moral education. Nonetheless, it does confront formidable threats and discouraging degradations. Noddings names one serious threat in the toss-off remark: “Specialization has killed whatever was liberal in liberal studies.” I believe specialization is related to other threats: the hegemony of academic departments and the cult of the major. The danger in these trends is that they tend to defer, discount, or exclude the “central questions of human life”; they do not connect the day’s lessons with the concern for the good life.

I find it disturbing, as I have said elsewhere, that many critiques of liberal education are “self-refuting — not in a formal, logical sense, but in an existential sense: a refutation of the self.” Astute critics employ the resources of their own liberal learning to attack the ideal of liberal education, when it is that very education that has endowed the insightfulness and eloquence of their complaints — and thereby belied them. This is “more than a disheartening ingratitude, more than sophisticated self-deception”; it is “an educated refutation of one’s own education, an *alma matricide*.”¹³

Nel Noddings is a mathematics major who became an educator and philosopher who reads Zane Grey and writes about care ethics; she exemplifies liberal education. Rather than charging her with such self-refutation, however, I prefer to understand her (her affirmations notwithstanding) as battling *within* the liberal education tradition, nudging its evolution, ultimately finding in what she termed her “confusion,” a recommitment to that education focused on life’s “central questions” — which she urged teachers to “muster the courage to discuss” — and on the reach for moral understanding to build a good life.

1. Francis Oakley introduced this term in various public presentations. See also, Francis Oakley, “Against Nostalgia: Reflections on Our Present Discontents in American Higher Education,” in *The*

Politics of Liberal Education, ed. by Darryl J. Gless and Barbara Herrnstein Smith (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992).

2. To name but two provocative examples: Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Minds of Today's Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); and Anthony T. Kronman, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007).

3. The vivid phrase of Paul Ricoeur's is used by Elizabeth Kiss and L. Peter Euben, *Debating Moral Education: Rethinking the Role of the Modern University* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 10.

4. Examples of this expanding genre: Jean-Francoise Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Jane Roland Martin, *Changing the Educational Landscape: Philosophy, Women, and Curriculum* (New York: Routledge, 1994); and Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*, 2d ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005).

5. Noddings, *The Challenge to Care*, 28–62. Significantly, these claims are made for liberal education “as it is traditionally defined.”

6. Nel Noddings, “Conversation as Moral Education,” *Journal of Moral Education* 23, no. 2 (1994): 107ff; reprinted in Nel Noddings, *Educating Moral People: A Caring Alternative to Character Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002), 118–30. The quoted section is from pages 123–24.

7. Nel Noddings, *Happiness and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

8. Compare Theodor Adorno's essay, “Education After Auschwitz,” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

9. Noddings wrote: “I agree wholeheartedly with [Alasdair] MacIntyre, however, that it would be wonderful if ‘fishing crews and farmers and auto mechanics and construction workers were able to think about their lives critically.’ . . . It would be equally wonderful if the same could be said of the graduates of our finest institutions of liberal education. But historical evidence does not support the contention that liberal studies, traditionally defined, produce this result. Some liberally educated people think deeply, critically, morally; many do not.” Nel Nodding, “Is Teaching a Practice?” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 36, no. 2 (2003): 246.

10. Noddings, *Educating Moral People*, 123. She describes the liberal arts as coming “perilously close to identifying intellectual development with moral development.” She recognizes among its “more temperate writers,” John Henry Cardinal Newman, for his separation of the goodness of liberal knowledge from the goodness of morality. But as D. G. Mulcahy has shown, that reading gives a misleadingly incomplete account of Newman's views on the moralizing experience of university life. D. G. Mulcahy, *The Educated Person: Toward a New Paradigm for Liberal Education* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).

11. Nel Noddings, “A Morally Defensible Mission for Schools in the 21st Century,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, January 1995; reprinted in Noddings, *Educating Moral People*, 94 (parenthesis in original). She elaborates these claims in *The Challenge to Care*, 28–43.

12. See also Noddings, *The Challenge to Care*, 28.

13. Daniel R. DeNicola, “Liberal Education and Moral Education,” in *Character and Moral Education*, eds. Joseph Devitis and Tuanling Yu (New York: Springer, forthcoming). I have drawn freely here on the ideas and formulations of that paper — though it contains no discussion of Noddings — including my explication of liberal education, its moral aspects, and various critical points.