

Renewing a Declining Tradition

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It is always useful when a thoughtful critic zeroes in on one's own ambivalence and confusion, and I thank Daniel DeNicola for that. To clarify matters a bit, I should start by saying that my main criticisms are directed at the liberal arts as they are presented in secondary schools. Some of the criticisms apply to colleges as well, but what passes for the liberal arts in high school — the specific disciplines of English, mathematics, history, and the sciences — are little more than preparation for further study in those narrowly defined subjects. Not only do they make few connections to existential themes, they make almost no connection to one another. Harold Rugg put his finger on the problem years ago, noting the conglomeration of facts within the social sciences: "Nothing short of genius on the part of a student could create an understanding of modern life from such a compartmentalized arrangement of material."¹

This criticism is made even more cogent by a contemporary scientist, E.O. Wilson, who argues that college students should pursue a specialization but continue to study the liberal arts — "for flexibility and maturity of intellect."² But he points out that the effectiveness of such a program requires "some depth on the part of the instructor, or at least team-teaching by a group of complementary experts" (*Creation*, 137). Indeed, he claims that "education in the future would seem to be less discipline-oriented and more problem-oriented" (*Creation*, 136). He may be suffering from the same ambivalence I feel.

Wilson wants the sort of understanding that Rugg sought:

There is ... an inevitability to the unity of knowledge. It reflects real life. The trajectory of world events suggests that educated people should be far better able than before to address the great issues courageously and analytically by undertaking a traverse of the disciplines. We are into the age of synthesis, with a real empirical bite to it. (*Creation*, 137)

It seems to me that, if we are to develop a synthesis at the college level, we have to cultivate that spirit at the secondary school, and I do not see that happening. Students are expected to study (master?) four or five subjects, but they are taught by people who know only one. There is rarely an attempt to bring things together.

DeNicola identifies four "orientations or approaches to liberal arts education: "transmission of culture, self-actualization, understanding of the world, and normative engagement with the world." How are these orientations of liberal education exhibited in our high schools? Certainly, there is an attempt at the transmission of culture but little is said about why the content to be transmitted has been selected. In literature, for example, selection is usually made by author and author's status, not by theme or problem. If you look carefully at Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate programs in history, you may worry that the burden of facts and prescribed themes is so heavy that there is not much space for reflection and the interplay of ideas.

Self-actualization has very nearly deteriorated to getting the highest possible grade point average and gaining admission to a prestigious college. Understanding the world is often short-circuited by our scorn for “popular science” (which might be useful in real life) and a preference for “real” science that consists mainly of preparation for the next science courses. And as for normative engagement with the world, there is one bright spot here — the current emphasis on environmentalism — and I hope we can retain and extend it. DeNicola says that these “polarities” are “complementary,” but that could only be true if they are *active*, and often they are not.

One way out of the confusion in secondary education would be simply to say that the English-math-history-science curriculum traditionally offered in our public schools is not a liberal arts curriculum. This claim would be the ultimate in the category DeNicola says is aimed at practice. But that is too simplistic. After all, it is clearly aimed at preparation for study in the liberal arts, and the sharp separation of disciplines typical of the high school curriculum is repeated at the college level. Specialization has fractured the liberal arts. So, at least in part, my criticisms fall into what DeNicola has called the narrative of decline.

But my criticisms go deeper than that. The current emphasis on an academic curriculum for all students reflects an odd sense of self-actualization. We seem to tell students that, if they study these subjects and go to college, they can be “just like us.” An education in the liberal arts has been identified with elites, and now we are all going to be elites. In another sort of society, we with our soft hands and heads stuffed with book learning might be thought useless and eliminated.

Our democratic society is better described by John Dewey and Walt Whitman than by Mortimer Adler and Robert Hutchins. Under the Whitmanesque way of thinking, we would not establish a model of the “best” and then shape everyone toward it. Instead, we would provide different programs for different talents and interests, and we would commit ourselves to promote a generous spirit of interdependence.

That said, should I join the second band of critics and recommend that the liberal arts be abandoned? No. I would like to see the treasure embedded in the liberal arts dug out, polished, and redeposited lovingly in everything we teach. Rather than setting up the liberal arts as a separate program to be studied in preference to something less desirable, I would like *to draw* on the liberal arts to enrich everything we teach.

In vocational education, for example, we might talk about a mechanic’s moral responsibility to both the object being repaired and the client. Matthew Crawford writes, “Any discipline that deals with an authoritative, independent reality requires honesty and humility.”³ There are virtues to be developed. And an appreciation for beauty can be cultivated. Crawford describes the satisfaction derived from fixing an ailing motorcycle — the deep satisfaction of restoring the functional beauty of a machine.

In mathematics classes, there are many possible connections to the other disciplines, and yet most teachers are pressed to ignore them and teach mathematical

manipulations. I would like teachers to spend more time with Lewis Carroll and the wonderful logic (and illogic) of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, with the Pythagoreans and the mystery of the integers (especially *one*), with Isaac Newton's struggle to bring the Bible into line with historical chronology, with Doug Hofstadter and M.C. Escher's art and Johann Sebastian Bach's music, with the historical wonder accompanying imaginary numbers, with Pierre-Simon Laplace's explanation for leaving God out of his celestial mechanics — "I had no need of that *hypothesis*," with phi and the golden mean, with ... The connections are so many and so beautiful, and we pay almost no attention to them.

In my first example, I suggested how the moral and aesthetic aims of the liberal arts might be incorporated in vocational education. In the second example, I suggested how a discipline, mathematics, might be stretched from within to make connections with other disciplines. In a third example, I want to consider Wilson's idea of organizing some of our courses by theme, problem, or issue.

Literature courses might be organized around existential themes instead of by author. Suppose our theme is peace and the horrors of war. As part of that theme, we want to promote the understanding of what sometimes happens to men engaged in battle. *The Iliad* is chosen for this purpose. Then, instead of concentrating on vocabulary, poetic devices, and the names of characters, teachers might direct students to other writings that build on the theme of Achilles's moral deterioration on the battlefield. After a brief description of each work, students would be invited to form groups to read, discuss, and report on their chosen work. The possibilities are rich.

Is such an approach to the liberal arts workable or would we encounter a host of objections? The first is probably innocent; it should not cause contentious debate. The second will arouse concern about "getting through the course" as defined by narrowly specified standards. It will also create worries about the connections to be made. There are people who will disapprove of the math teacher's mention of Laplace's reference to God's creative efforts as a "hypothesis." What other subversive connections might this teacher share with her students?

The third is perhaps the most problematic. Who will choose the themes? If a theme is potentially sensitive, will it be allowed? If each teacher makes the choices, will curriculum chaos result? If some politicians get their way and tenure is abolished, will any contested liberal theme be tolerated?

Without such changes, I see little hope for maintaining the spirit of the liberal arts.

1. Harold O. Rugg, *American Life and the School Curriculum: Next Steps Toward Schools of Living* (Boston, Mass.: Ginn, 1936), 332.

2. Edward O. Wilson, *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 37. This work will be cited as *Creation* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. Matthew B. Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 100.