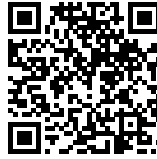




WHAT IS "LIBERAL EDUCATION?"

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I. What Is Education

Plato conceived education as an art of perfecting man. According to this view, education is possible because man is a perfectible being. Nobody ever talks about perfecting God, because God is not perfectible, but perfect; nor do we ever discuss the education of angels, because, although an angel is not absolutely perfect, he is perfect within his own essence, which means that an angel receives all the perfection that is due and proper to his nature in one instantaneous act.

To be sure, there are in the visible world other perfectible things besides man; but even so, the notion of education does not seem to fit the modes of perfectibility of things that are not human. A machine, for example, can be constructed and improved, while a tree attains its proper perfections by growth. Yet we would all hesitate to talk about the "education" of a plant or of a machine; and it would be just as incorrect to speak of the education of an animal. A dog, for example, may be trained; but a dog could never be educated. A dog is trained by being made subject to human purposes and notions, not even remotely entertained by the dog itself. Besides, it is trained, not to become a more perfect dog, more suitable for beastly society, but rather, in order to become more useful or more amusing to man, even if in the process it loses its intrinsic properties and gets to be, not more, but less of a dog.

Education remains, therefore, a distinctively human affair, and as such, derives its distinctiveness from man's peculiar way of growing into his perfections. Like all living things, man possesses within himself a vital principle of growth; but in man, this principle is further determined by rationality. It is by virtue of his rationality that man can consciously entertain his purposes, choose his means, and criticize his own actions. This coincidence of growth and rationality in the same being is a privilege which renders man unique in the whole universe.

Plato must have been fascinated by this marvelous blend of qualities in man, this blend of intelligence and growth, for he makes it the central theme of practically all his *Dialogues*. In these *Dialogues* we have a most vivid picture of education. In every case we find that education is a growth, a movement from confusion to clarity, from ignorance to knowledge; and also we find that in every case, the student is his own first teacher.

The role of the teacher is simply to help the student in his seeking and to guide his steps. The teacher of the *Dialogues*, usually Socrates, is supposed to be the wise man, the man who has already attained

those perfections desired for and by the student. The teacher stands as a proximate exemplar; and, by virtue of the fact that he is supposed to see the end of the road, he can also guide and direct, by ruling out false starts and by suggesting better ones. To put it in a more characteristically Platonic simile, the teacher is a midwife, who assists at the birth of the idea in the mind of the student.

We can learn a great deal more about human nature and also about education, by observing with Plato, the way man grows into the attainment of his perfections. In contrast with other intelligent beings (God and the angels), man must accomplish his rationality through effort and discipline. Because human rationality is an accomplishment, it enjoys only a precarious existence.

All our human concerns which manifest man's rationality under any aspect, whether of order, purpose, truth, or beauty (the sciences and the arts, institutions, laws cultural values, etc.), depend for their continued existence upon the disciplined activities of men. Cathedrals do not grow like weeds, and no painting was ever made haphazardly. Every new-born baby is an absolutely new beginning, and every new generation of babies is a terrific challenge and threat to the existing civilization and to the established order of things.

Indeed, our life here is an explosive situation! Man is a joining together of the nothingness and infinity, and it is education which must span the chasm between the two extremes. No wonder that Plato, having understood the nature of education, should view it as the highest social function, commensurate with the whole of life, and absolutely necessary for the perfection of the individual and of society. Plato had such a profound appreciation of the importance of education, that starting to describe the building of a state, he ended up, in his famous Republic, with a kind of super-school on his hands.

But there comes a point where we must remind ourselves that, after all, we are with a pagan philosopher, and should be on guard lest we let him mislead us in matters about which we ought to know better. And we do, as a matter of fact, know more than Plato about the origin and purpose of our human existence. Let us, therefore, be on the alert for any possible defects in Plato's educational theories and practices which might flow from his pagan errors about man.

Plato certainly understood that education must be of the whole man, which means of the complete composite of soul and body. He also rightly defended and emphasized the primacy of the soul in matters of education. He knew that the human soul is immortal, and at least vaguely suspected that

man's life-long educational activity finds its consummation in another life.

But Plato also held some erroneous doctrines about the soul. It is a well known fact, for example, that he taught that the human soul exists prior to this life. We Christians, on the other hand, know that every individual human soul is created singularly and immediately, at the moment of conception, by a separate act of God. Here we have in this issue what might seem at first glance like a slight difference of belief: but on more careful examination, this disagreement between the Christian and pagan outlooks, reveals such a chasm as can only be explained by the tremendous intervening fact of the Incarnation.

Plato can hardly be blamed for missing the point with regard to the fact, the manner, or the purpose of creation. This kind of knowledge requires a far greater intimacy with God than was given to the pagan world. It remains to the immortal credit of Plato that he attained, by mere reason, a clear concept of the kind of reality the human soul is. He knew the soul in its spirituality and in its simplicity; he recognized its power and its dignity; he understood its activity of life in the body, and its activity of knowledge beyond the body; and he proved philosophically, that this kind of being cannot be dissolved or destroyed by natural means.

But the same kind of argument led Plato also to believe that the soul could be neither made nor developed by any natural process. He, therefore, concluded that the soul is not only immortal, but also eternal, having no beginning as well as no end in time. The Christian alternative, namely, that the soul is created out of nothing by the omnipotence of God, did not present itself to Plato; for to him, God is neither infinite nor omnipotent, and the very idea of creation out of nothing would have sounded to him as no less than a philosophic absurdity.

Plato, therefore, according to his own lights, had to educate a soul which was never created, which had no beginning in time, and no definite destiny for the future. The human soul to Plato is a little sad deity which cannot die, but can lose everything else it ever attained; even to the very memory of its personal identity in previous lives. This unconscious deity is accidentally united to, or rather, imprisoned in a material body, which it must leave after a certain length of time, to be united, perhaps to another body, and to go through the same cycle all over again.

This soul has already had more intimate contacts with eternal realities than it has in this life, and therefore must have been in a higher state of perfection than in its present state. Unfortunately,

however, it has lost all memory of these perfections and must now make a new start at re-ascending the scales of perfection to lose them again once more. How futile the whole thing must appear when viewed from the total perspective of eternity! And yet, this is as optimistic a view of human existence as the pagan world ever attained.

These errors of Plato are at least partly responsible for some of the most obvious defects in his theory of education: depreciation of the body and of sense experience; a false theory of knowledge according to which we learn by remembering what we already knew in a previous life; and, most seriously, a relative disregard of personal values by treating the individual primarily as a function of the state. Yet, in spite of these defects, Plato remains, even today, a great master of the art of teaching, and the leading champion of the very concept of liberal education. It is in this last capacity that we are now primarily interested in Plato, and therefore, let us proceed to examine more specifically what Plato means by liberal education.

II. What Is Liberal Education?

We are used to distinguishing between two kinds of education: liberal and vocational. But Plato, while recognizing the need of developing the practical arts and professions, reserved the term "education", at least in its absolute unrestricted sense, to what we would call liberal education. "This is the only training which, upon our view, would be characterized as education: that other sort of training which aims at the acquisition of wealth or bodily strength, or mere cleverness apart from intelligence and justice, is mean and illiberal, and it is not worthy to be called education at all."

From following the thoughts of Plato we get a hint as to the essence of liberal, or in his language, true education, which distinguishes it from all kinds of training for useful skill or for useless cleverness. Liberal or true education is education whose end is man himself. It is the education of man as man.

When a man is trained for the perfection of what he makes, he receives vocational training, or, if we call it education, we are using the term in a forced sense; but when a man is trained and instructed for the perfection of what he is and what he does (immanently) within himself, then we may say that he is being educated in the most absolute sense of the term. We may teach a man to become a carpenter, a farmer, a physician, or an engineer. We may also teach a man to become a good man, good not only in the moral sense but primarily in the ontological sense, in the sense of perfected, developed, accomplished, in the sense that he can exercise and apply his faculties coordinately and for their

natural purposes.

When men are trained vocationally we have every right to expect better products (potatoes, chairs, medical services, or efficient machines), but we have no right to expect better men unless somewhere in our educational plans and activities we aim at the proper perfections of a man. You are as likely to produce a well-constructed bridge by accident and without aiming at it, as you are to produce a well-educated man by a scheme of training thoroughly directed to other ends.

It should go without saying and as part of nature's justice, that in a society where leaders receive specialized vocational training without liberal education, no sound norms can rightly be expected and no human values are secure. When the present trend towards vocational training finally succeeds in overwhelming and washing away the last vestiges of liberal education, we can expect to live in a world of good things and bad men. We shall have, to give one good example, unintelligent and confused leaders, on the one hand, and excellent atomic bombs, on the other!

What are, then, those human perfections which constitute the end of liberal education? Plato's answer to this question is in a way the major theme of all his writings. If one dares put it briefly and succinctly in one sentence, this is what it would be: man's proper perfection consists in the knowledge of the absolute good, and in response to beauty. The absolute good is the good-in-itself and the source of the goodness all other things.

It is good, not mediately as being the cause of something else, but immediately, ultimately, as being the end to which all other things are means. Man seeks this end, not only by his senses but by his intellect, and can attain it only with his intellect. But man must begin with his sense experience, and gradually advance, through higher and higher aspects of the good, reflected in the world of contingent things, until he is finally ready to see the primal source of all goodness

On the way to this absolute good, beauty is the sign-post. Man, therefore, must begin by learning to respond to beauty as given to the senses and as found in the visible universe, but he must not dwell in it nor let it conceal that invisible beauty it is meant to proclaim.

Not all knowledge, therefore, is conducive to the perfection of man, and consequently, not all knowledge has value in liberal education. All the sciences of space and time, of experience and

experiment, of statistics and measurements, such sciences as mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, history, economics, etc., must find their justification primarily in the practical order, in the order of what man makes outside of himself.

Man's perfection consists in a growth from the fragmentary knowledge of sense experience to a unified vision of the mind; and hence all the above mentioned experimental sciences, can figure in the course of liberal education, only in so far as they lead the way to philosophic science; they must be treated as preludes to philosophy. Their end must be the understanding of the eternal truth, first as reflected in the visible world, but finally and consummately, as it is in itself. The climax of liberal education consists in philosophy and theology, and all its earlier stages must be ordered to this end, both in the selection of their subject matter and in the mode of their presentation.

It is especially remarkable that Plato, who is the greatest pioneer in the field of philosophy, should recognize the necessity of revealed truth, and admit the superiority of such truth over the highest truths of human reason working on its own. Although he was handicapped by an inadequate pagan religion, he still had the genius to see that those intimate truths of the inner life of God could only be known if God Himself were to reveal them, and that once known, such truths would unquestionably be the crown of all human knowledge, and the summit of wisdom in this life.

Thus in the *Republic*, after making Socrates describe the building of a state by the guidance of reason, Plato makes one interrogator raise the question as to whether any thing is left out. "Nothing to us," replies Socrates, "But to Apollo, the god of Delphi, there remains the ordering of the greatest and noblest and chiefest things of all."

"Which are they?" asks again the interrogator.

"The institution of temples and sacrifices, and the entire service of the gods, demigods, and heroes. . . These are matters of which we are ignorant ourselves, and as founders of a city we should be unwise in trusting them to any interpreter but our ancestral deity. He is the god who sits in the center on the naval of the earth, and he is the interpreter of religion to all mankind."

III. The Epochs In Plato's Educational System

The key for Plato's system of education is the Greek word **μουσικε** (sounds like "musikay") which has survived in our modern languages in such words as "music" and "museum". To the Greeks the term had a wider signification, including within its comprehension all the liberal arts. Greek mythology personified the liberal arts, making each one of them a goddess, a Muse, who guides, inspires, and stands as a type and an ideal. Thus we have the Muses of history, poetry, astronomy, eloquence, music, dance, tragedy, comedy, and lyric poetry.

The Greeks saw beauty everywhere; whenever reality is known, it reveals rhythm and harmony, and hence education must progressively direct the mind to higher and higher aspects of beauty. The mind rises from beauty in the plane of sheer sense experience, the rhythm and harmony of sounds, shapes, and movements, to the beauty of law and order manifested in the visible world, the music of the spheres; and finally to the source of all beauty, Beauty in itself, the eternal *Logos*, attained by the art of dialectics.

Every one of the arts and sciences is called **μουσικε** in this sense; and it is in this sense that we must understand the passage in the *Republic* where Plato makes Socrates say: "When the modes of music change, the fundamental laws of the state change with them." Corresponding to the different planes of knowledge, we can distinguish four epochs in Plato's educational plan. Here is a brief description of each of these epochs in their sequence.

1. The first twenty years are concerned mainly with the body and with the organic faculties. The children, as early as the age of three are introduced to mythology; this is meant to train their imagination, and to cultivate love of valor and heroic deeds. The mythology must be purged of any references to the gods which might degrade the concept of divinity in the child.

The fact that mythology does not give the factual or historic truth does not matter, but it must be censored and purified from anything that might give a permanently false impression of reality. Factual truth is not so important at this stage, because it is an intellectual concern, and this stage of education is mainly concerned with the senses.

After mythology, follow in sequence: gymnastics, reading and writing, poetry and music, and mathematics, until finally this epoch is rounded off in two years of military training, from the eighteenth to the twentieth year. Plato recognized the imitative tendencies of the soul, and thus he prescribes that the child must be surrounded from early childhood with beautiful objects which embody the truth he

will come to understand later on in life. Hence the surroundings and environment are tremendously important in this formative period.

2. The second period, extending from the year twenty to the year thirty, is concerned with the sciences of measurement and understanding. Plato mentions plane geometry, solid geometry, astronomy, and harmonies. He conceives their role as a prelude to dialects.

Evidently, he envisaged a patient treatment of these topics, with sufficient time for creative reasoning on the part of the students, and meditations on fundamental truths and notions which prepare the way for philosophy. This is clear from the amount of time he allows for this kind of work, although the amount of facts, principles, experiments, in such a variety of sciences, and in such a short time, that we leave him no leisure for reflection, meditation, wonder, nor for any creative work on his own initiative.

Furthermore, the language of these experimental physical sciences today, is so little related to the language and truths of philosophy, that instead of being a prelude to philosophy as Plato intended, these positive sciences stand in our day as a tremendous handicap to philosophic thought.

3. The third epoch, which occupies the years thirty to thirty-five, is concerned with the art of dialectics, "the art which elevates the mind to the contemplation of what is best in existence". This is the crowning mark of liberal education; the mind's eye, which so far had been trained only to recognize the reflections of Good, must now be exercised to see the Good itself, the ultimate source of truth and beauty in the universe.

To Plato, philosophy was not an organized science, or a system of sciences. The task of organizing truths of philosophy was to be carried out by his disciple Aristotle. This is why Plato was mainly concerned with the art of attaining philosophical knowledge, and this art he called "dialectics". In our days, we possess not only the fruits of Plato's and Aristotle's efforts towards discovery and organization of philosophical truths.

We have, in addition, the results of centuries of collective effort on the part of scholastic philosophers, ending in a body of logically related sciences, full of precise notions, clear definitions, and well established truths. This philosophic tradition was accomplished through gradual steps, beginning with sense experience and common-sense knowledge.

We must remember that the individual also must grow to philosophic understanding through the same way. Philosophy is a science, but philosophizing is an art. If we realize this truth sufficiently, we would not depend so exclusively in our teaching on the presentation of philosophic truths as finally and definitely formulated.

The dialect method of Plato can still teach us a great deal as to how to teach philosophy effectively, and how to train the student to raise philosophic problems, to attain a realization of a philosophic truth, and to formulate and defend this truth. We can make philosophy much more of a living tradition by reviving the Platonic method, if not the Platonic science of philosophy.

4. The fourth and last epoch, requiring fifteen years of life and terminating at the age of fifty, is a period dedicated to real experience in the world. It is significant that Plato did not try to carry the world into the school; the only way to know what life is, is to go through it. No man is truly wise enough to be entrusted with the destiny of a state until he has seen the real world in the light of universal truth.

Philosophic ideas alone may be sufficient for the purpose of philosophic contemplation, but the philosopher-king, must make practical decisions for the common good, who must have more than ideas, namely, experience. Nor would experience without the philosophic discipline and knowledge of the Good suffice, because experience can move on a plane of insignificant facts unless illuminated by the idea of the Good.

It is twenty-three centuries since Plato opened his academy and invited the youths of Athens to seek the knowledge of the Good. Since that time, something has happened on our planet; the Eternal Truth, the very Person of Good, has broken the bounds of eternity, plunged into our world, and lived as one of us. If Plato were to come to life today, how would he respond to our tidings of great joy? What would he think of our response?

[Brother Francis Maluf](#) was born in Lebanon in 1913 and held a PhD in philosophy. Along with Father Leonard Feeney, he was a founding, in 1949, of the [Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary](#), a religious Order. Brother Francis went to his heavenly reward in 2009. This [article](#) appears courtesy of [Catholicism.org](#).

The [image](#) shows, "[To Kryfo Scholio](#)" ("The Hidden School"), by Nikolaos Gyzis, painted ca. 1885-1886.

