

The Kearsse Distinguished Lecture

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Liberal Education and Its Discontents

I think it is appropriate that I preface my remarks with a word of congratulation to all of the recipients of the Kearsse award today. If it's reasonable to suppose that the wisdom and love of parents are reflected in the good character and good works of their progeny, then an equal share of this tribute should be extended to the parents and grandparents in attendance. If it's just as reasonable to suppose that the daunting task of rearing children is more considerable than the writing of a liberal arts essay, one might be tempted to offer more than an equal share. Since the theme of my lecture today is liberal education, it is especially important that I pay the proper deference not just to our pupils but also their parents since, in Plato's *Laws*,

the Athenian Stranger tells us that liberal education begins in childhood under the tutelage of the family. Of course, I might also somewhat mischievously add, that same Plato encourages a youthful Lysis to doubt the love and authority of his father Democrates, that the discussion of justice in the Republic is only possible because Polemarchus turns out to be wiser than his father Cephalus, that in the fifth book of the same work Plato suggests that children are better off raised not by their natural parents but by the state in loco parentis, that in the Theatetus philosophy, which for Plato is the summit of liberal education, is compared to the activity of the midwife, not the mother or the father, and his protagonist Socrates, who is described in the Phaedo as the “wisest, justest, and best of all men” is put to death for corrupting the city’s youth.

The paradox I’m drawing attention to here is that classic liberal education has been variously defined in ways that are not transparently compatible with one another: Plato often makes it seem as if parents are the primary instruments of a child’s youthful education and often that they are intransigent obstacles to be defiantly overcome. If this is the case, it becomes amusingly unclear if I should be praising all the parents here for the wise and active stewardship of their child’s education or praising them for passively delegating that responsibility elsewhere, at least if we continue to

take Plato as our guide. For the remainder of my lecture, I will briefly discuss three different views of liberal education and what their relation is to each other; hopefully, some clarity on the issue of what liberal education means will make it easier for us to figure out what precisely it is that we're celebrating, or since this is an awards ceremony, how precisely we should distribute praise or blame.

One type of liberal education is described by John Stuart Mill as “professional education” or that training which is largely designed to prepare students to compete well in the marketplace and to earn a wage. RIT is a nationally recognized university when it comes to such professional preparation. Given all the contentious debate surrounding our social security system, I might remind you that one of the oldest and most venerable of retirement plans is the production of prosperous and doting children. However, almost everyone agrees with Mill that this is only a part of a liberal arts education; Mill goes as far as to distinguish it from “education properly so-called”. Today, we honor the Kearsse award winners for their demonstration of a commitment to excellence in the Liberal Arts—all the more impressive given that while this is a very fine university it is still a technical institute, that the College of Liberal Arts is one college among many, that a serious devotion to a Liberal Arts curriculum might provide the

least salubrious avenue available to you to affluence and professional distinction, and maybe most significantly, that much of modern culture runs counter to its sincere esteem. Still, I'm told RIT's motto is "To earn a living and to live a life". This seems to presuppose that earning a living is distinct from living a life, that our occupational labors and the compensation that comes with it are for the sake of something higher, and that our professional endeavors, however interesting, will fail to satisfy our deepest longings. As John Stuart Mill puts it, professional education presupposes liberal education since "Men are men before they are lawyers, or physicians, or merchants, or manufacturers...". If a Liberal Arts education is the proper provenance of what Mill calls the "comprehensive or connected view", if it is our best hope for discovering how to "live a life" once we've earned a living, then maybe one can paint a less modest a picture of the proper place of the College of Liberal Arts here at RIT: one might say that the other eight colleges provide many and sundry means for realizing the ends only a Liberal Arts education can divine.

In other words, some measure of wealth and comfort, not to mention professional reputation, might be necessary conditions of a good and happy life, or roughly amount to what Aristotle calls the "equipment of virtue". However, even common sense tells us that these things are not identical to

happiness or virtue nor are they the sufficient conditions. Professional success is a good but it is not *the* good; it is one good among many other goods. Part of the often concealed value of professional success is that it points to the possibility of a higher good, of some more profound incompleteness that animates our action, exactly because in isolation it fails so spectacularly to sate the more basic desires of our souls. If Marx was right, that we are at bottom *homo economicus* or laboring beings, then it would follow that our lives are fraught with alienation and frustration.

More comprehensive in scope than professional education and closer to what is typically meant by a liberal education today is an education in republican citizenship. In the *Laws*, Plato describes this education as one that “makes one desire and love to become a perfect citizen who knows how to rule and be ruled with justice”. The most important stages of such an education, the Athenian Stranger goes on to argue, are the early stages: when habits, tastes, and aspirations are formed; when heroes and objects of emulation and admiration are set before the imagination’s eye; when a shared sense of destiny is cultivated; when gratitude to the past and responsibility for future generations is instilled; when capacities for collective deliberation and action, for leadership and loyalty, are fostered, tested, and celebrated. The curriculum for this kind of education should be

centered on poetry, music, rhetoric and epic literature, history and politics, and above all, religion.

Thomas Jefferson described such a civic education as our most reliable fence against the unjust encroachments of government and a precondition for the appropriate exercise of liberty. In fact, for Jefferson the “most effectual means” of preventing “degeneracy” and the transformation of limited government into “tyranny” would be “to illuminate, so far as practicable, the minds of the people at large, and more especially, to give them knowledge of those facts, which history exhibiteth, that possessed thereby of the experience of other ages and countries, they may be enabled to know ambition under all its shapes, and prompt to exert their natural powers to defeat its purposes”. Democracy, understood by Hamilton as an “experiment in self-governance” that is “unprecedented in the annals of human history” requires an education in liberty: education must “enable every man to judge for himself what will endanger or secure his freedom”.

That our democracy is an experiment indicates the extent to which previous attempts at establishing “extensive” republics had “produced sensations of horror and disgust”. This is why Publius notes in the Federalist papers that popular government had to “be rescued from the opprobrium under which it has so long labored” and recommended to “the esteem and

adoption of mankind”. Invoking an old and venerable view of democracy, Rousseau counsels that a “true democracy has never yet existed” nor cannot in principle since the demands it places upon the virtue and intellect of its citizens are too great. Liberal education as an education in civic republicanism is a vehicle for producing an enlightened citizenry. This kind of liberal education vindicates human liberty not only because it produces enlightened self-interest grounded in rational self-control for the common citizens but also because it cultivates the spirit of independent achievement based on natural virtue and talent among the best of men: As Jefferson argues in a letter to John Adams, “The natural aristocracy I consider as the most precious gift of nature, for the instruction, the trusts, and government of society...May we not even say that that form of government is the best which provides the most effectually for a pure selection of these natural *aristoi* into the office of government”?

In pointing to what is best by nature versus what is best by convention, Jefferson raises the possibility that the regime points beyond itself to a trans-political good. Liberal education as an instrument of citizenship cannot encapsulate what is highest for man, unless we are perfectly political beings, whose most sacrosanct needs can be supplied by the city. However, if political life only produces a shadowy simulacrum of

our erotic aspirations we necessarily look beyond the city for our ultimate satisfaction. Like commerce, even political life points beyond itself to a higher good, which is the object of the highest form of liberal education. This is the education of the philosophers that Plato describes in the 7th book of the Republic. More than anything else, this is what is supposed to counter the problem Tocqueville diagnosed as the creeping conformism of American intellectual life. Liberal education in this sense, in the most profound sense, is the breathing of a rarified air that awakens us to the possibility of human greatness, even if we ourselves cannot be great. In the words of a great political philosopher: "Liberal education is the counterpoison to mass culture, to the corroding effects of mass culture, to its inherent tendency to produce nothing but specialists without spirit or vision and voluptuaries without heart".

The extraordinary task of the modern university is to somehow bring to consummation these three very different interpretations of the role of higher education, even though it is not always immediately obvious that each is congenial to the others. The almost schizophrenic composition of the university's mission has necessarily resulted in the fracturing of the unity of the disciplines. Augustine's notion of *una sapientia*, or one wisdom, has gradually given way to the ever-increasing proliferation of specializations,

each only a part of a once sought after whole, each discipline originally defined both in terms of this partial perspective but also its awareness and openness to the whole. In this sense, the unity out of diversity of the disciplines was meant to mirror the complexity of human existence: each human being must balance the desires of the body, the obligations of the city, and the cravings of the soul. Each human being is an animal that perfects its human nature by attempting to transcend its animality. Aristotle observes that human beings are the beings that are somewhere between beasts and gods.

What makes the situation of Liberal Education so dire for us today is that it is no longer obvious that those of us who are the official gatekeepers of this tradition take it seriously anymore. Many of us who are charged with its protection and cultivation now question its internal coherence, or we question the very notion of excellence, or the possibility of formulating objective criteria that permit us to reasonably assess the extent to which our efforts approximate the university's ancient purposes. Often it is the case that we see the university as an extension or reflection of modern mass culture rather than a philosophical counter-weight to it. If this is the case, we run the risk of transforming the modern university from a tool of critical, even occasionally austere self-examination into one of sychophantic flattery.

Furthermore, philosophy, once the attempt to replace opinion with knowledge has been reduced to the history of philosophy; rather than a living source of wisdom the discipline is too often counted as a museum of strange and alien artifacts that at best invite an a spirit of antiquarian curiosity. We read the great books because of their novelty or because such exercises are still considered the benchmarks of gentlemanly erudition but not because we anticipate learning anything. Without that particular expectation, it is unreasonable to expect anything of the order of careful reading. It is rare that a student seriously mines the great philosophical debates for moral or political guidance, or useful instructions on the nature of courtship or love, or turns to Aristotle for the sake of contemplating the elusive meaning of happiness. It is hard, though admittedly not impossible, to expect the kind of breathless excitement bordering on epiphany that must have overcome Augustine upon the reading of Cicero's Hortensius. I have students from my courses seek my counsel during office hours on many issues, but almost never on the purposes of their lives.

Not without irony, our current crisis of confidence in the product we deliver to our students has not moderated our expectations regarding what four years of college should cost and has been accompanied by a thoroughgoing insistence on the formulation of quantificational rubrics and

metrics that allow us discern with apparent exactitude the progress of our students and the quality of our instruction. Rather than provide us with useful information regarding their performance or ours, such efforts are more likely to transform even further our understanding of liberal education by compelling it to fit into our Procrustean paradigms of assessment.

One great advantage of the current crisis regarding the meaning of liberal education is that it does provide us with an opportunity to re-evaluate our most entrenched traditions with an investigative scrutiny that might not have been inspired by less contentious times. Our doubts about our traditions, and about tradition itself, have resulted in a historically extraordinary imprimatur to plumb the depths of the intellectual heritage to which we are often unconscious heirs.

It speaks well of RIT that despite its emphasis on technical education and professional advancement it still esteems the cause of Liberal Education. It speaks very well of all the recipients of the Kearsse award today, that despite often powerful and contradictory currents, you have shown a sensitivity and attraction to the liberty of the human mind. The awards you receive today are tokens of your youthful but noble endeavors, just as lives of self-examination will serve as living monuments to others of your efforts and of the possibility of human thought.