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“Not to know the relative dispositions of things is the state of slaves or children; to have mapped out the universe is the boast, or at least the ambition, of Philosophy.”—John Henry Cardinal Newman

# What Good is Liberal Education?

Alan J. Hicks

Last fall a special governors' commission issued a report on the declining state of American education. Reports of this kind come around, it seems with the regularity of the seasons; they have become as routine as the school term itself, and we are no longer surprised by their evaluation of students' deficiencies in the basic skills deemed necessary to function in the world. In this particular report, these deficiencies are declared to be especially salient when placed against the background of the current state of science and technology. Measured by this criterion students are seen to be behind not only when they know less than their predecessors, but even when they know as much or more, yet have not advanced at an equal pace with technological progress. And so we are faced with the prospect of always playing catch-up, and never quite getting there, for “there” is always changing—a sure formula for perpetual educational crisis.

Let me here put aside the paradox in the judgement that Americans are deficient in relation to the technology that they themselves are, still, one of the leaders in advancing. What I wish to consider instead is an attitude regarding the basic nature of education, one that I believe is fundamentally flawed, and which dominates the administrative bodies of the educational establishment. This attitude underlies much of the current concern over the state of education, as evidenced by the nature of that concern. As reflected in the aforementioned report, the governors' over-riding concern is with education as skill. This concern is the fruit of a pragmatic attitude toward education and knowledge, within which knowledge is viewed solely as an instrument to be used to some external effect, and education is seen as an investment in human productivity. Learning, thus understood, is nothing if not learning to do something. In other words, by this account we learn only in order to work. But this is in opposition to the educational view of the ancients, in which man is seen to work in order to live, and learning is a *sine qua non* of a truly *human* life. The understanding and contemplation of truth for its own sake was seen by Plato, Aristotle, and St. Thomas Aquinas to be the

highest pursuit of man, because of their vision of the nature of man. The modern subordination of knowledge to purely functional or utilitarian ends, on the other hand, reflects a limited view of knowledge, corresponding to a limited view of man, a view that is hardly a vision. In order to reestablish the claims of a learning higher than that which is merely pragmatic, we must first seek to regain a true and complete vision of man, a vision which will itself serve to illustrate the essential nature and force of this higher learning, in the possession of which man attains his highest perfection.

## I.

In the *Phaedo* Socrates relates that as a young man he was frustrated in his attempt to arrive at an understanding of the ultimate principles of things. This frustration resulted from following the science of the day, which invariably led him along the path of a shallow materialism, reducing all things to “such absurdities as air, ether, and water.” Failing to satisfy, such explanations were finally left aside and Socrates struck a new course, by means of which things were no longer to be explained according to mere physical components but according to their universal essence or determining form; for there is, says Socrates, “no means whereby anything can come into existence other than by participating in the proper essence of the particular thing whose nature it shares.”

Today we are in possession of an empirical science far in advance of that with which Socrates had to contend. And yet if we seek to understand an object through the medium of that science alone, we will see it only in its partial and limited elements, however sophisticated the description of those elements may be. If that object be man, we may distinguish his elements according to the various perspectives of the special sciences: chemistry enumerating those elements in one way, biology in another, psychology in yet another, and so on. But regardless of the perspective by which the parts of man are identified, and how accurate is that identification, there must be a single principle in which those parts attain to their unity as a whole; a principle that brings the parts themselves into existence as parts; for nothing is a part except in relation to a whole. That single principle is the substantial (and determining) form, which in man and in all living beings has been called the soul; and the consideration of its nature falls within the special domain of philosophy, the science of ultimate causes.

Aristotle follows his master in seeking to understand man in his substantial form or soul. However, he maintains that the soul can only be understood by means of reflection upon observable activity, for as an intrinsic principle there is no immediate access to its secrets. It therefore remains hidden to the probes of a positivist science, which will only consider the existence of an observable reality. That science, applied to the activities of man, usually results in some form of behaviorism, reducing man's life to a mere collection of observable behaviors, clusters of activities which may be charted and graphed, influenced by means of external stimuli, but never truly understood. But with no single principle underlying the various activities of a man, thereby uniting them as to a common source, there is no justification for even identifying those sundry activities as activities of a single thing. And if through the manipulation of external stimuli we are able to influence the behaviors of man, to what end shall we influence? In other words, if observable behavior is all we have to go by, then we have no criterion for determining why one set of behaviors is preferable to any other. That criterion can only lie in something distinct though connected to the behaviors themselves: the nature of man as determined by the objective essence of the soul,

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that dynamic one in which his many parts have their very existence as parts of one living thing. It is only by comprehending the various aspects of man in the unity of a whole that we can attain to the true comprehension of the thing itself—man and his good.

It is to the soul, then, existing as the animating principle of man in all his capacities that we must turn as the source of all human activities, for "it is through the rational soul that man is not only man but also animal and living body and being."<sup>2</sup> These activities range from the most basic life sustaining functions of nutrition and reproduction to those activities characterizing the animal kingdom—the operations of sense and the appetites that follow the direction of sense. Yet as human beings we also participate in an activity of a unique and spiritual dimension. This is the activity of intellect. Through the use of reason we are able not only to direct those vital functions shared with lower forms of life, thereby imbuing them with a specifically human quality, but also to attain to that immaterial union with the essences of things characteristic of knowledge. By means of the spiritual power of intellect man transcends the limitations placed upon the material dispositions of sense. He is able to comprehend the world. It is this spiritual power of potential relation to all things that sets man off from the beasts of the field, making him a little lower than the angels. While "every other substance has only a particular share in being," says St. Thomas, the intellectual substance "may comprehend the entirety of being through its intellect."<sup>3</sup> Thus man can only complete himself, which is to say can only truly be himself, to the extent that he takes in or relates to the whole of reality, becoming one with that whole.

We see then that the world in which man exists is a necessary companion, required not only to sustain his organic nature, but also to realize his highest capacity, the capacity to know. Knowledge must have its object, and this world is our first object. Indeed, we could not even know ourselves without first knowing the world in which we live, for contrary to what is sometimes assumed, there is no direct or immediate knowledge of the self. As it is we know ourselves as rational beings only by first exercising our capacity to know. Yet while man requires the world in order to exercise the capacities rooted in his very nature, man is also part of the world itself. As man is not sufficient for himself, so the world as a whole, of which man is a part, does not suffice to account for itself, but requires the agency of that being which alone suffices for itself—the necessary being of God. In order, therefore, to understand man or the created order as a whole we must understand the relation of all things to God, for outside of that relation there is nothing.

From the fact that all things exist because of God's creative act it follows that the end of all things is determined by Him. But outside of Himself there is no end for which God could act, and therefore we are compelled to conclude that God Himself is not only the first cause but also the end or final cause of all creation. While it is true that the good of man consists in the perfection of his nature, this perfection has as its ultimate, we might even say cosmic, purpose the manifestation of the power and glory of God. All creatures have this manifestation as their ultimate end. But man, as a result of his rational soul created in the very image of God, more fully manifests that power and that glory. It is for this reason that the lower creatures are rightfully said to be subordinate to man, and we are justified in using this world to our own ends.

## II.

Now whether one holds the preceding overview or not, it nevertheless serves to illustrate a philosophical perspec-

tive that goes beyond the mere knowledge of particular facts to a general framework within which those facts may be understood. Such a general and connected view of things was considered by the ancients to be the especial mark of a liberal education. Today, however, we labor to effect what we consider to be liberal education by the destination of a wide assortment of information out of a variety of subjects traditionally designated as liberal (e.g., English and history). Yet liberal education consists in much more than mere facts piled upon facts. It consists rather in the formation of a mental power, what John Henry Newman called an enlightened or illuminative reason, which he described as "the power of viewing many things at once as a whole, of referring them severally to their true place in the universal system, of understanding their respective values and determining their mutual dependence. Possessed of this real illumination, he continued, "the mind never views any part of the extended matter of knowledge without recollecting that it is but a part, or without the associations which spring from this recollection. It makes everything in some sort lead to everything else, it would communicate the image of the whole to every separate portion, until that whole becomes in imagination like a spirit, everywhere pervading and penetrating its component parts, and giving them one definite meaning."<sup>4</sup>

Whoever would aspire to this illuminative view must learn to rise above the mere accumulation of facts to a vista from which these facts may be seen in their proper relation to one another. He must, that is, be able to ascent to the universal principles of things; for it is only within the framework of such principles that we can even begin to have that vision. Unfortunately, as the student more closely approaches the maturity that enables him to grasp the universal principles in their relation to particulars he is increasingly funneled into a concentrated area of particular study. Those who follow through this process to the end, while perhaps quite competent in their special area of expertise, are usually competent only in the particular, and are often left with a superficial understanding of the world as a whole. They are left with a perspective not unlike that of most tourists who wander through the aisles of the great cathedrals of Europe, looking at altars here or there, statues of saints unknown, stained glass windows, or whatever else happens to catch their eye. Perhaps if there is time they will pick up a few more details, but only details, bits of information generally unconnected. Such people may be contrasted to one who enters with the perspective of the artist; who sees manifested in the particulars, universal principles of form and design; who furthermore is able to see the various parts—portals, arches, ceiling, etc.—existing in the unity of the whole, grasping the beauty of symmetry and the due proportion of an architectural type. Yet even this view is inadequate to the thing if it does not include an appreciation of the motives lying outside the structure considered in itself: the aspirations of the builders and the ultimate purpose of an offering made to the glory of God. Unless one understands this ultimate ends though he be a master architect he cannot completely understand what lies before him.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of this general and integral view of things—the view that sees things as a whole, in which the various parts are related, and through which they exist as parts. Only such a view is adequate to the thing as it is, be it a cathedral, a man, or the world at large. Of course we may distinguish the limited aspects of a thing, and give detailed consideration to one or more aspects in isolation from the whole. Such an approach is the method of the sciences and is not without certain advantages. Even so, a particular aspect, when considered apart

from the whole, is but an abstraction and does not present reality as it is. A knowledge of mere aspects, no matter the extent of that knowledge, therefore represents a defect of understanding, a failure to comprehend reality. This failure can be of serious consequence when the object of our concern is man and the educative means to his good, for without the understanding of man in his totality we are unable to know what actions are most appropriate to the achievement of that good.

Because of the complexities of the human predicament—the variety of possible activity and the conditions under which it may be pursued—it is sometimes difficult to know what contributes to our greater good. Aesop tells that once the Hands and the Mouth, disgruntled over the Belly's apparent sloth in the light of their own industry, decided to withhold all food from that quarter. Being deprived of its only source of food the Belly was unable to nourish the rest of the body, which before long began to wither and die. On the point of extinction, the Hands and Mouth were at last forced to resupply the Belly, admitting that the Belly indeed had its work, the accomplishment of which was necessary for the good of all.

We can see this fable's immediate application to an integral being considered as a whole: that for a being possessing multiple capacities there exists a good beyond the mere fulfillment of any one. This overall good does not result from the free reign of the manifold capacities, which would be chaos, but rather in their harmonious exercise in relation to one another. Taking the body by itself, we can see that there are a multitude of particular needs and functions to which we may minister. It is only when all of the various aspects are given their proper due, however, that we attain to the physical harmony that is health. This means that equal emphasis should never be given to every bodily function or need, for not all are of equal importance. True harmony will only exist when the higher functions are treated as such, the lower standing in a subordinate role. Yet man possesses a good beyond mere health. Man is also an animal with sensual and emotional capacities and needs, is also an intellectual being with all that is entailed by reason. It is from this latter capacity of reason that we derive our properly human character which determines our unique good as man, including thereby moral good.

From this perspective we can then maintain that a single capacity or combination of powers may be ordered to some limited good, the pursuance of which in certain cases would nevertheless interfere with our greater good. The concupiscible appetite, for example, is ordered toward sensible goods, yet its immoderate exercise, while perhaps resulting in the attainment of an abundance of sensible goods, would nevertheless interfere with the pursuit of higher goods, and in the long run may even interfere with our ability to obtain and enjoy the sensible goods. We may even be driven by the dictates of an inordinate appetite to the commission of crime in order to satisfy that appetite. In that case the appetite works against the social good, which is also our good, for we need harmonious social relations in order to flourish as human beings. In all cases, then, the appetite considered in itself alone is ordered to some good, but what is good in one regard may be evil in another.

According to this account all capacities of human nature taken by themselves are good. But of all human capacities reason is the highest and therefore gives to man his highest good in its exercise alone, prescinding from any results external to its exercise. In addition, reason is that faculty by which we are able to order our multifarious powers to the harmony or good of the whole, including both the individual considered as a whole, and the whole of soci-

ety of which the individual is a part. In having access to an elevated view we are better able to judge which course of action best contributes to our overall good, for we then judge from a perspective that enables us to see all of our actions, and the limited goods of those actions, in relation to our entire good.

At this point I can very well anticipate an objection being raised to all this talk of universal schemes and ultimate ends. Such talk, it might be said, is fine and well, especially when considering questions of a moral nature. Questions of that sort indeed require for their resolution an understanding of man's total nature and his ultimate good. We should then be grateful for the insights of philosophers and theologians whose job it is to consider the relative value of the many possible human actions in light of the overall good. Yet the philosophical view is not everything. There exist legitimate problems concerning particular aspects of reality the resolution of which has no relation to man's ultimate good. If one is in need of a coronary bypass, for example, what is required is not the philosopher or theologian, but a man who has spent years studying the human body, its malfunctions, and the available remedies, and who has logged time in the operating room. A philosophical outlook may better enable a person to make a correct moral judgement, but it in no wise makes him a better surgeon, and sometimes what is needed is a good surgeon. While there are, then, ultimate questions and concerns, there exist at the same time more immediate concerns of man demanding for their resolution an intellectual formation antithetical to the general view. Through the division of intellectual labor and the concentration on particular problems that such a division allows, great advance has been made in addressing these concerns. This advance has nowhere been more evident than in the physical sciences, which, being free to pursue their respective objects unencumbered by universal or ultimate considerations, have experienced a striking success, the very proof of the merit of such specialized pursuits.

Now I say in reply that I do not deny the rather obvious truths that certain problems require for their resolution a specialized knowledge, and that there have been countless benefits resulting from the pursuit of such specialization, especially during our own times. Just recently, in fact, I spoke with an old acquaintance who told me that his young son would have died at birth if not for an advance in medical technology achieved but a few years before. Incidents like that can well make one glad to live in a time of such progress, when so much can be done to alleviate human suffering and make life on earth more bearable. All the same, the question of the kind of knowledge best suited to the alleviation of particular problems is a question not of education but of training. Education, however, is of a much broader scope than training for a particular task. "Education concerns the whole man," says Josef Pieper. "An educated man is a man with a point of view from which he takes in the whole world. Education concerns the whole man, man *capax universi*, capable of grasping the totality of existing things."<sup>5</sup>

I grant that a general understanding of things by itself does not issue in any immediate practical result, and it is on this score that it is held to be so little worthy of pursuit. Indeed, it has almost become in our time an unquestioned principle that knowledge which issues in no utilitarian advantage is worthless; after all, if it has no use then what can be its worth? But such thinking betrays a confusion over the proper relation of means and ends. As it is, that which is merely useful is not itself good, except insofar as it serves as an instrument or means to something else. Its whole

worth insofar as it is useful lies in the fact that it stands as a bridge to something other than itself which is the real object of our desire. We submit to a painful medical procedure, for example, not because we desire that procedure, but for the sake of the health that is its result. But those things are of true worth which we desire, not because they lead to something else, but for themselves alone. Liberal education can be considered such an object. For apart from any advantages which may accrue to its possession, and indeed there are many, apart from this, I say, it can be and always has been desired for itself alone. This is what qualifies it as an end and therefore a good in itself.

On the other hand, we must question even the long-term utility of practical knowledge when, as is so often the case, it is possessed and therefor applied in isolation from a general view. For without the ability to grasp the larger scheme of things, how can we ever know whether an advance in a particular area is truly to the benefit of man or the world at large? It seems as if almost every advance in power resulting from man's specialized and highly technical knowledge results in some long-term harm to mankind. Perhaps, you say, that is too strong. But who can reasonably deny the many grave and unique problems of modern man that have followed from some spectacular achievement of the scientific or technological specialist? We are, for example, continually experiencing ecological disasters, one after another, as a direct result of some technical advance or scientific discovery. We have learned to split the atom and now live under constant threat of world annihilation. We travel at inhuman speeds, and accumulate and transmit information at rates that boggle the mind; all of which contributes to the increasing burden of stress and anxiety that so oppresses the spirit of modern man. Our increasing powers have resulted in decreasing security and an ever-burgeoning care. With all these problems and so many more, the question may be legitimately asked whether the great advance of our modern "age of the specialist" is really an advance at all.

Earlier I pointed out the truth that the good of an individual cannot be found in the free reign of his multiple powers, but only in the harmonious interplay of those powers in proper relation to one another. The absence of this harmony I described as chaos. In society at large there exists an analogous confusion of purpose resulting from the free reign of the specialists, who pursue their various objects unencumbered by considerations relating to the good of man or the world as a whole. It is their narrow focus of vision that had made them almost incapable of such considerations.

The moral chaos of the specialized society is accurately described by Wendell Berry in *The Unsettling of America*. "Because by definition they lack any sense of mutuality or wholeness, our specializations subsist on conflict with one another. The rule is never to cooperate, but rather to follow one's interest as far as possible. Checks and balances are all applied externally, by opposition, never by self-restraint. Labor, management, the military, the government, etc., never forbear until their excesses arouse enough opposition to force them to do so. The good of the whole of creation, the world and all its creatures together, is never a consideration because it is never thought of; our culture now simply lacks the means for thinking of it."<sup>6</sup>

Modern education must bear its share of responsibility for this loss of the means to take the larger view. While we perhaps offer a wider variety of subjects than in times past, they are almost always presented from an isolated, that is to say, a specialized, perspective. Students advance through grades, but rather than rising to universal considerations,

are merely presented with more information of an increasingly technical and particular nature. Witness the practice of confining teachers to their specialties. The assumption is that one is incompetent outside his specialty, and perhaps that is true. Thus science and math teachers know little of language arts, English teachers know little of science and math, and they all know next to nothing of music or history. I once taught at a private academy where the bold suggestion was made that the faculty be required to teach all subjects, as is done in the lower grades. This was met with unsurprising incredulity, for who in his right mind could expect a teacher to know all subjects? But then, we expect the students to know all subjects—or do we? Though educators would protest, I sometimes think we don't care whether students remember most of what has been taught, (and who could reasonably expect them to remember all the details served up in schools of the age of information?) Our concern is, rather, to present a variety of material in order that the student can decide what specialty he may eventually wish to pursue; with teaching as one specialty among the rest, pursued within the school of education. Whatever general knowledge is gained is considered valuable only insofar as it contributes to the ability to pursue that specialty and to function as a citizen, which means to be able to vote and pay taxes. Yet we have become so dependent on a system of specialization that we can't even perform the latter functions without the help of an expert. So we have tax experts to help us pay our taxes, and political analysts to tell us how to vote. Really, the only thing left for us to do now, outside of our particular job, is to entertain ourselves, and even here we rely on an industry of entertainment experts, typified by the professional athlete whom we watch on television while sitting back on overstuffed chairs, "puffing our guts on insipid American beer and potato chips, gaping like Nero at his gladiators." Our system of specialization has become a parody of itself.

Now it should not be thought that I am decrying the need for specialization, meaning by that term the application of one's ability to some primary work. Man has to work, and a certain degree of specialization is necessary to do any work that is not of the most rudimentary kind. We are all familiar with the expression "jack of all trades; master of none." What I am maintaining is that in order to know how to use one's work well, so that it contributes to the overall good of the person and society, we must be able to stand above our work and be its master, or we will stand below and it will master us. But then, man does not live in order to work, man works in order to live. The cult of work, what we in American sometimes call the work ethic, measures man only in terms of his work. Ironically, that is the same view of man contained within the Marxist philosophy, a philosophy that sees the worth of the citizen only in terms of his utility to the state. The perennial philosophy, on the other hand, does not measure man solely in terms of work. It recognizes that man must work in order to live, and to live as a man is to live according to our nature, not like the beasts of the field groveling on all fours, seeking only to fill their bellies; but according to our nature as man, *anthropos*, the up-turning animal, the animal that stands erect so that he may look up to the stars and beyond: to the cause of all things, the first and last principle, the center of all things. Only then do we live as human beings.

Would that it were our purpose to bring our students to life as human beings, to lift them up to that vista where they may at least catch a glimpse of the integral nature of being in all its diversity. I say a glimpse, for even a lifetime is not enough time to gain this illuminative vision of things. Man can never master the world which has as its source an infi-

nite God. But as Newman affirms, to possess even a portion of this illuminative view is the highest state to which nature can aspire, in the way of intellect.

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