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Freedom From Perspectives

The Buddha once famously stated that our lives are like the lives of a chick before hatching from its egg. Pre-enlightenment, our perspectives stem from a certain misleading vantage point - one which neglects the possibility of a wider worldview. We are limited in our understanding of the world around us by our own mental shackles, but as the Buddha states, we can reach “that realm of complete purity... only through detachment and contemplation” (Easwaran 65). Mark Edmunson and Neil Postman both argue that we can reach this realm of awareness through a proper educational system. They also argue that the education system we need is currently broken. In his essay “The Word Weavers / The World Makers”, Postman argues that our society is failing to educate about semantics and the meaning behind words and definitions - a topic which totally alters our worldviews and perspectives. Failing to address this important area of study leads us to being uneducated and unaware of ourselves and our thoughts. In his essay “On the Uses of a Liberal Education”, Edmunson argues that the system is a failure because education has turned into a consumerist design where colleges are advertised and students “buy in order to be”, losing enthusiasm and passion to the cold churning cycle of consumerism (173). In claiming that the system has failed us, the authors are both missing the point about education. Edmunson and Postman are incorrect; The system isn’t broken - it is our own willpower as individuals that is lacking. While Postman and Edmunson both argue that our

perspectives are limited, they both fail to recognize that the only one who can get the chick out of the eggshell without damaging it is the chick itself. We cannot be taught how to be proper citizens or free-thinking individuals; It must be cultivated with great personal determination.

Edmunson and Postman would agree that students today are bathed in an ignorance that they are, for lack of a better word, ignorant of. Edmunson says, "Listening to one another, students sometimes change their opinions. But what they generally can't do is acquire a new vocabulary, a new perspective, that will cast issues in a fresh light" (178). What Edmunson is saying here is that students are dealing with an illusion of critical thinking. They may be actively participating in discussions, communicating with their peers, and adjusting their opinions on a topic, but what they learn is only surface level. There is something deeper here that is hidden from students, due to an alarmingly low "capacity for enthusiasm" (Edmunson 172). Edmunson blames the consumerist culture of America for this lack of passion, and suggests a list of reforms, such as "dismantling the football team and making the stadium into a playground for local kids, emptying the fraternities, and boarding up the student-activities office" (185). Such amendments to the university system may start to chip away at the consumerist model, but how will this truly benefit students in the here and now? Will a more academic focused curriculum be enough to push students to strive for greatness? Either way, the individual must be the one to make that choice. No amount of pressure (or relief) from external factors will force one to take the necessary steps to "overcome what they are" (Edmunson 185). According to the Buddha, individuals must "shape their minds... as irrigators lead water where they want, as archers make their arrows straight, as carpenters carve wood..." (Easwaran 126). Ignorance can be unlearned, but more is required than just re-engineering a student's environment. Passionate determination is essential.

Similarly, Postman offers lackluster solutions that may not have much of an impact on the present moment. Postman is mainly concerned with the “decisive power of definitions” and how to free ourselves from their jurisdiction (32). He suggests that “humans live in two worlds- the world of events and things, and the world of *words* about events and things” (30). According to Postman, the definitions we assign to events and things create literal boundaries that limit our understanding of the world around us. These boundaries can have tremendous societal effects; The quality of definitions can control what we say and “to [some] extent, what we say controls what we see” (Postman 33). Clearly, our understanding of the words we use, or lack thereof, is essential in shaping our world-views. Postman’s ideal solution is “to provide students, as a matter of course, with alternative definitions of the important concepts that which they must deal in a subject” (31). This may seem like a clear solution, but how is giving students *more* definitions any different from giving them just the one? Expanding a student’s knowledge set is not useful if the student does not apply themselves to their learning. Postman has only posed the existing system in a different format as a new solution. As with Edmunson, Postman is blaming the system for problems that stem from the individual - and offering solutions that individuals have the power to overcome themselves.

Both Edmunson and Postman offer a spate of solutions that do not reach into the underlying issue. There is a smaller-scale solution to the problems the authors have identified. World altering systematic changes are not required; The individual can shape their own mind. In fact, education may not even be a factor in unlocking critical thinking. The Buddha said, “More than your mother, more than your father, more than all your family, a well-disciplined mind does greater good” (Easwaran 116). According to the Buddha’s teachings, a well-disciplined mind will solve Edmunson’s dilemma and allow students to see the world with an open mind and an

open heart, leading to passion and legitimate critical thinking. It will also allow students to maneuver the world of semantics and gain a better understanding of themselves and their surroundings. Essentially, a well-disciplined mind, which can only be attained through “unflinching determination” and “focused attention” will do more for a person than any teacher, model, or system can (Easwaran 65). After listing his ideas for systematic reform, Edmunson poses some solutions that compare with the Buddha’s great teachings. He says, “Ultimately, though, it is up to individuals– and individual students in particular– to make their own way against the current sludgy tide” (Edmunson 186). The Buddha confirms this: “All the effort must be made by you; Buddhas only show the way” (Easwaran 205).

Works Cited

Edmunson, Mark. "On the Uses of a Liberal Education." *Perspectives on Writing and Education for Stevens Institute of Technology*, edited by the Freshman Experience Faculty of Stevens Institute of Technology, XanEdu, 2021

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Easwaran, Eknath. "The Dhammapada."

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