

Encouraging a Liberal Education: The Fine Line between Education and Indoctrination

Entry for the Buckley Essay Contest

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When Milo Yiannopoulos visited Berkeley's campus in 2017, he did not get a word out before his event was canceled due to violent protests that caused almost \$100,000 in damage.[1] The irony that a liberal arts university silenced a prominent voice in the conservative community cannot be overstated. Russell Kirk, in his book *The Conservative Purpose of a Liberal Education*, powerfully reminds us that education is meant to free the human mind, rather than enslave it to any particular agenda, especially that of the state. A true liberal education must solely serve a person's own sake, not that of any administration, a type of education that is sorely lacking today.

Kirk delineates two types of education, a liberal education and a career education, which necessarily serve mutually exclusive purposes. Sir William Hamilton, in his book *Metaphysics* states, "Now the perfection of man as an end and the perfection of man as a mean or instrument are not only not the same, they are in reality generally opposed. And as these two perfections are different... The one is styled liberal, the other professional education the branches of knowledge cultivated for these purposes being called respectively liberal and professional, or liberal and lucrative, sciences." [2] Thus, a liberal education seeks to improve the man, while a professional career education seeks to use the man as a tool. This dichotomy underlies the difference between liberal arts universities and technical colleges, which serve distinct roles in society. The role of a liberal education is to free the mind – to transcend the limits of current knowledge and think for oneself. As James Russell Lowell puts it, a liberal education "emancipates the mind from every narrow provincialism, whether of egoism or tradition, and is the apprenticeship that everyone must serve before becoming a free brother of the guild which passes the torch of life from age to age." [3] This is a more powerful type of knowledge that encourages open-mindedness and no presupposed loyalty to a certain way of thought.

It is also important to note that before the modern state, education was not intended to serve "national goals" or teach people how to be "good citizens," rhetoric that originally came from John Dewey and his followers.[4] Rather, education initially used to teach religion for examination of transcendental and moral truths. What does it mean to really be human? What does it mean to do good?

George Orwell's 1984 serves as a stark warning of what happens when the highly educated members of society – the doctors, lawyers, and engineers – begin to serve the state fully rather than for what they believe is right. In fact, their beliefs become fully shaped by the state's goals. Through the idea of doublethink, the highly educated even can begin to believe incorrect statements such as "2+2=5." As Kirk puts it, these people have been shaped by "by the barren world of monopoly industry and centralized government." [5] They then perpetuate the provincial thinking and torture of people like Winston, the main character, who eventually are brought into line as well.

1984 may seem like a faraway reality, but the line between education and indoctrination is becoming ever more unclear in academia today, which may lead to a slippery slope. Increasingly, more political beliefs rather than open-minded discussion of various beliefs systems are being taught in the classroom. Universities are overwhelmingly liberal, and liberal beliefs are often espoused indirectly as a result. Russ Kirk has his own experiences with this: “When once I was invited to give a series of lectures on conservative thought at a long-established college, a certain professor objected indignantly, ‘Why, we can’t have that sort of thing here: this is a liberal arts college!’”[5] The professor clearly believed that “liberal” meant an allegiance to a particular political belief system, rather than a method of considering many different viewpoints.

As a parallel example, we can use science education in the US today as a microcosm of what might happen if all education seeks to bring people in line with others’ thoughts. The core principles of science are to hypothesize, experiment, and then draw conclusions, yet scientific education itself is spoon-fed to students through solely memorization rather than experimentation. As a result, incorrect assumptions about core scientific principles have endured for abnormally long time periods (for example, the assumption that light required aether to travel through), delaying critical progress. Of course, the stakes are much lower in scientific progress, as we never really know how much the delay of the discovery of certain phenomena will affect us. However, indoctrination of uniform and possibly detrimental societal beliefs are much higher stakes, as they can rapidly change the trajectory of society, and can very easily begin to chip away at our treasured freedoms.[6]

Ultimately, we aim not to create the perfect citizen, but to cultivate the person’s own thinking and intellect. As a result of being educated, people will readily admit that they do not know everything. Education should be full of asking the right questions, not providing the desired answers. However, through this process, people will be able to contribute their expertise, and inadvertently, the state will become stronger in the process. Thus, education’s purpose to serve the individual first and foremost, but mentally free individuals will be able to bring a plethora of benefits to society as well.

(893 words)

1 References

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