the undergraduate college and the world of work

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The relation between undergraduate liberal learning and the world of work is a perennial topic. But from time to time it takes on a special urgency and receives a special definition. It is a perennial question, first, because the minimal condition of any good educational system— and perhaps for the survival of any educational system—is that it facilitate some access to adult economic roles or that it provide a way of gaining economic independence. Thus, the problem of the relation between education and work is always present, and any kind of education that eschews a primary concern with this basic problem needs to give it special attention. Such is always the case with liberal studies in the undergraduate college.

the contemporary problem of work and schooling

The problem receives a peculiar definition in the contemporary United States, however. We are about to enter a period that is demographically peculiar, compared to the past thirty years. The size of the college-age population will rise slightly and then decline in the next decade. Furthermore, even the proportion of each college-age cohort seeking traditional four-year liberal education may decline. Such a decline presents problems very different from the
problems of growth. Furthermore, neither the public nor professional educators have had any experience with such problems over the past thirty years.

But although smaller numbers of persons may seek liberal studies in the future, there will nonetheless be a tremendous increase in the number of college graduates entering the full-time work force. The number of persons between fourteen and twenty-five will grow slightly and then drop over the next decade. By 1985 this age group will be some three million persons less than it is now (Coleman, 1974, p. 49). But in the same period, the number of B.A.'s in the age group from twenty-five to twenty-nine will expand enormously, increasing by 1985 to a level more than twice what it was in 1970 and four times what it was in 1960 (Coleman, 1974, pp. 73-74). As James H. Kuhn notes ("Current Reading," 1974, p. 121), "During this decade some 3.5 million persons will enter the labor force for the first time each year—700,000 more per year than in the sixties. . . . A government task force on higher education warns that by 1977 every recognized profession will be over-supplied with college graduates."

Pessimism is not the point. The point is rather that college graduates entering the work force over the next decade may have a tough time fitting their work experience to their hopes for meaningful employment and to their expectations and carefully laid plans for the future. We may then anticipate a substantial shift in the grounds of self-interest on which the public has rested its support for education at all levels. Taxpayers may be understandably reluctant to lavishly support institutions that educate their children well to do things that do not exist.

These developments are likely to severely test the long-held, firmly entrenched, and almost religious American belief that the value of education is, first of all, instrumental and therefore extrinsic. Education is good because it pays. More of it is better because it pays more. This basic tenet has been confirmed in the experience of generations of Americans. We may now be reaching the point, however, at which it will not be confirmed. If that is so, then the basis for the public's interest in the support of education will change.

The gravity of the question, as well as its possible answer, may be found in the irony of universal secondary education. Within this decade we may succeed in graduating from high school more than 85 percent of each eighteen-year-old cohort. Attaining this goal would represent the culmination of an American dream—the dream of extending to every youngster the relative advantages to be
gained from completing a secondary education. That dream is based on the conviction that education pays.

Difficulties arise as we approach the point where every member of a generation completes the twelfth grade. At that point, the relative benefits to be derived from success approach zero and the relative liabilities for failure escalate rapidly. Under those conditions, though no special benefit can be gained from completing high school, everything can be lost by failing to do so. It turns out then that what could be undertaken to secure a good must now be undertaken simply to avoid disaster. Thus the self-interest underlying the support of education is transformed, from the search for a good to the avoidance of an evil. Either interest will suffice for the continued support of education, but experientially they are worlds apart.

This perspective is especially poignant for minority groups. They are typically the last to benefit from the educational system, and they typically seek to benefit from education in the same ways as their predecessors have benefited. The irony is that they cannot do so. For their predecessors, education was a good; for them it is a necessity. For others it paid; for them it merely helps to avoid unmitigated disaster.

Unless the present generation of college graduates is able to confirm the belief that a college education pays, the next generation may find themselves in a position akin to that of minorities. For them, there will be nothing in particular to be gained from undergraduate studies, although it will remain a necessity.

There are, and always have been, voices declaring that education is not to be valued because it pays. They have usually offered two grounds for their belief. The first is that education is intrinsically good. It enriches experience, expands horizons, and adds valuable but delayed pleasures for leisure. This is true. But it is also a view of limited credence to the youth of disadvantaged groups and to those of all ages for whom learning is hard and the pleasures of study, unlike the pleasures of play, are remote.

The other view is that education is an aggregate good—good for the society. It produces an informed electorate, better citizens, and so forth. This is true also, and important. But what is good for society in general is seldom a sufficient motive for anyone in particular. No youngster struggling to complete high school can be much encouraged by being told that it would be better for the world if he persevered. Nor is anyone trying to master the French verb likely to be motivated much by the knowledge that society will be improved if he succeeds.
The view that education pays, pays for the individual in terms of his self-interest and his present and future pleasures, remains at the heart of the American support for education and the grounds for the connection between education and work. That is the belief being tested by the current direction of change in American education. And these are the changes that give a special focus to the renewed interest in undergraduate liberal studies and their relation to work.

But there is another reason for renewed interest. For those whose lives have been caught up in liberal studies either as students or as teachers, the recent developments are likely to be viewed as the emergence of a new and narrow kind of vocationalism. The truth may be otherwise, however. Colleges and departments of liberal studies may be only now emerging from their most vocationally oriented period in this century. And so, by contrast, what may appear to be the dawn of a "new vocationalism" in the undergraduate college may be better viewed as the struggle to reappropriate an old, quite traditional, and strictly nonvocational view of liberal learning.

Surely it is true that, in the past two decades at least, the primary purpose of undergraduate liberal studies has been to prepare students to enter graduate studies, and the primary function of advanced graduate work in the liberal arts was to prepare students to teach. Such an approach is perfectly viable in a period of rapid and sustained educational growth; it makes sense as a matter of social policy and also as a psychological stimulus for the young teacher and student. But such a view does make the purpose of education strictly vocational. It is the end of this vocationalism that now confronts the undergraduate college.

a very old or very new response

Though it may seem odd, even perverse, to say so, nonetheless, it is my thesis that what is needed by way of response is not a new kind of vocationalism, but an old, quite traditional, yet new and purely nonvocational view of liberal studies. Otherwise, we shall not be able to understand the relation between the undergraduate college and the world of work.

Such a response may be discovered in two points. The first is to mark an important distinction between jobs and work. The second is to recognize that we cannot deal with the relation between education and work without confronting head on the problem of
moral education, for the function of liberal learning is not vocational but simply the cultivation and extension of virtue. The vocational focus of education comes not from relating it to work but from relating it to jobs.

To the reformers of the sixteenth century, as to their medieval predecessors, it was quite clear that every man’s work was to be the bearer of love and service to neighbor. That one’s station in life was prince, serf, or merchant was quite incidental to the essential definition of his work. One’s role provided only the setting, position, or status within which each was to do his work, that is, be the bearer of love and service to neighbor.

Two views emerged from this assumption. The first was the view that persons carry out their work, their vocation, in or within a particular social role. The second was the view that executing the duties of one’s role just is one’s work. Both views, especially the second one, make a strong connection between work or vocation and job.

Thus who a person is came to be identified with his work, which meant his job. But once we recognize how this identity came about and realize that it need not exist, then it becomes possible to distinguish between work and job, between life work and how one makes a living. Some may find their work in their job; others may find it away from the job. Children can be taught to distinguish between two questions: how they intend to make their living and what they intend to make their life work. Most of us are not heroic enough to be always at our life work, even when we are fortunate enough to find one. And so for most of us most of the time our work redeems our jobs from triviality, and our jobs provide the structure and order to life that makes our work possible.

Seen from this perspective, the function of liberal learning can be understood not in relation to the world of jobs but in relation to the human need for work. In speaking this way I do not mean to denigrate the importance of jobs. Far from it. I mean only to point out that it is not in relation to particular jobs or occupations that the meaning of liberal learning will be found.

Work, understood in this way, requires many things in order to exist at all. Three of these are efficacy, competence, and some public. Work is a kind of doing that entails a kind of finishing or a kind of completion. It is a kind of doing, moreover, that entails the completion of something durable or lasting. It is a doing that results in a work. Work therefore contrasts with futility, which is a kind of effort that is always done to be undone, is never finished, and never
results in anything durable. In this respect, work is to be contrasted with labor. A world that did not permit effort to be concluded in some durable thing would be a world that could not contain work. Moreover, a world of futile labor could not contain human beings, creatures who are agents and doers rather than sufferers of what happens to them. Humans require potency or efficacy, and a world that they can make.

Work is one of the chief means of self-discovery, a kind of testing through which we discover our capacities and our limits. In that respect work, as distinguished from employment, is the means we use to discover who we are and what we might become. The very idea of work then entails the idea of competence, or being really good at something. Finding a work to do thus entails finding a way of being competent, that is, expressing one’s capacities for skill, craft, intelligence, concentration, and a sense of style. These are the elements of competence, and, when united, they make an activity peculiarly human. Finding how to express them is one way that we undertake to discover ourselves. Competence helps to make the self specific.

But self-discovery is accompanied by self-disclosure, and that requires the presence of the self to some kind of public. Whenever a human being competently performs a work to which he can point and say, “See that! I did that,” and when those looking on say “Yes, that’s good,” then there redounds upon the worker the judgment validated by some public that he is good. When the self, discovered by the exercise of competence, is disclosed in some public, then work becomes one of the chief means by which human beings confirm their dignity.

Work does not have dignity; the worker has dignity. His worth is often confirmed through work, and sometimes even through jobs, when jobs permit the disclosure of the self through the exercise of human competence. But often, and perhaps increasingly, human worth is not discoverable in jobs. But that fact, if it is a fact, constitutes a critical objection not to the point I have been trying to make clear. Instead, it is a critical objection to any employment system that does not permit the exercise of human work.

The distinction between job and work is important here. Work requires for its very existence the possibility of human potency, the exercise of competence, and disclosure in some public. Jobs do not require these things. Nonetheless, there are a variety of activities through which human beings may discover the benefits of work. Terkel (1974) provides considerable evidence for that.
evil, not in a typical Mannichean approach with its perpetual struggle of good and evil, but with the simple theological claim that God is just inept. If one has any traditional theological sensitivities, the suggestion will seem contradictory. Ineptness is somehow a defect, a substantial fault. And thus to account for the presence of evil on the assumption that God is just inept is like saying that God is not God. Indeed, we do treat ineptness as a kind of moral defect. We cannot suppose that the best kind of man is one whose life is filled with repeated exclamations of "ooops!"

This aspect of our moral conscience is ever present and also very old. It is an important part of the Platonic, Socratic, and Aristotelian view of moral education. The high points of Greek thought on these matters came at a point in time similar to our own. It has always been the experience of men that when the world goes to pot in a hurry, when the traditional understanding of the good life seems to fall away, when the principles on which we rest the coherence of life no longer command belief, then men turn their attention to the questions that really count. And those questions concern the need to know how to secure those conditions without which the good life cannot exist and the good person cannot survive. It involves knowing how to secure those conditions without which friendship cannot endure, without which community cannot be enjoyed, without which power cannot be chained to authority and thus unleashed reveals its rootless bestial character.

It should not surprise us that under such conditions two important aspects of moral conscience begin to surface. The first is an increasing consciousness that the best kind of person is a person possessed of a kind of comprehensive competence, an all-inclusive kind of practical skill or art. The second is a corresponding collapse of the familiar distinction between what is moral and what is prudent.

Both of these were features in the classical conception of moral education. The central moral metaphors in such a view are the metaphors of skill, art, and the public. *Arete*, that ubiquitous word that we so slovenly translate to *virtue*, meant simply *excellence* to the Greeks. It was not a particularly moral term. Everything has its excellence, a knife, a horse, and even natural objects like stone. Virtue is simply excellence in relation to some function appropriate to a thing—hence the importance in Greek thought of trying to identify and understand the peculiar functions of a human being.

Again, it often happens that when students are first intro-
duced to the classical frame of mind they are told that the prime sin among the Greeks was *hubris*, overextending one's self. But we could just as well argue that the chief human failing was *hamartia*, or missing the mark. The metaphor is fundamentally one of art and skill. The corresponding failing is no longer one of wrongdoing, but of mistake or error and the remedy is not moral obedience, but practice. The aim sought is not so much obedience to moral law as it is the attainment of a good character—a being well or well-being that includes a kind of doing well. Insofar as *hamartia* is a moral concept at all, it is the concept of a kind of moral competence.

The point is strengthened when we notice where good doing is found in the Greek perspective. It is in the arts and crafts. Constitution-making is an art, the art of making the boundaries of the community and shaping the way life will be lived in it. Governance is compared with the art of sailing, not an unfamiliar analogy. Good living is compared with archery. The way that practical judgment functions in the good life is revealed in the way it functions in the crafts. *Kalon* is about as close as we come to a moral concept in the Greek lexicon and it means *beautiful* or *noble*. The basic conception of the good person and the good life is thus the conception of a kind of skill, art, craft, or competence.

For Paul Goodman, one of the durable images of education is that education is part of what is involved in "making a world," and Paul Goodman was a classical scholar. In his book *Making Do* he denies the Aristotelian distinction between making and doing. The central problem of the good life is making a world and *doing* what that world contains. It is man's highest work (For more complete discussion of Goodman's position, see McClellan, 1968, chap. 6).

changes in the moral perspective

How does this perspective differ from the prevailing ideas of moral education and work? Moral theory, as we have come to know it, is essentially based upon the search for the principle of duty or the law of conduct rather than the skills necessary to make a world and to secure human goods within it. The virtues are hardly discussed at all, and I know of no modern moral theorist who has dealt with the place of friendship and the management of time and material things in the good life. Yet most of the goods that human beings are concerned with in the modern world are such essential, but "non-moral" goods.

The concept of virtue, understood in this way, is not the pris-
tine moral conception that we are accustomed to. It is instead a kind of excellent doing, involving the skills required to secure in the world the things essential to good living. It is a set of skills that relate directly to the conditions of action and to the direction in which actions may take us. They are political skills, but not only political. They are the skills needed to make a world and to do well what that world contains.

When I argue that liberal learning is concerned with the extension of virtue, I mean excellence in the sense just explained. And when I argue that the connection between liberal learning and the world of work will be found in a new—yet very old—conception, I mean to suggest that the exercise of this virtue in securing the goods essential to living well is both the first and last function of liberal learning and also the highest work of human beings.

If we are to understand the relation of liberal learning to work along these lines, two problems arise immediately. The first is that we can no longer be as clear as we used to be in identifying just what the skills of virtue are. The second problem is that it is extremely difficult today to know for what community the conditions of the good life are to be secured. We can no longer be sure of its boundaries nor at rest in whatever boundaries we seem to set. Despite these difficulties, an answer may be approached in the claim that liberal learning, so understood, will require two elements: discipline in the skills of action and rootedness in space and time. These two requirements may correspond roughly to the capacity of the social sciences to cultivate the skills of action and the evocative powers of the humanities to create compelling moral images of membership.

The relation between thinking and acting seems to me a most, if not the most, fundamental problem of education. It has to do with cultivating a relationship between thinking and acting so that we do not get what Sartre calls bad faith, that condition in which men think one thing and do something else altogether. In teaching and in scholarship, this relationship must be taken seriously, or else more and more the educational process becomes unrelated to the actual involvement that anyone has in the world. The union of thinking and acting also involves a union between skills and rootedness.

Gilbert Highet has defended the idea that knowledge has intrinsic value in the quite specific sense that if a man knows the structure of a leaf, all other things being equal, he is better in that respect than the man who does not know it. His argument in defense of that knowledge, an equally perspicuous one, has memorized things but other things being think not. On the knowing from the necessary bit of a importance in the value in proportion not mean that to be encouraged, except as it improve.

Knowledge admits human beings what people want knowledge to act, is a world increasingly, and through large power in various a world increasing within but upon secure in the world a good life. The concerns the end of liberalism.

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In our own human work, the man of good taste...
The defense of that view is persuasive, but it omits serious attention to an equally persuasive counterexample. Is it true that a person who has memorized all the telephone numbers in the local directory, all other things being equal, is a better person than one who has not? I think not. On the other hand, there may be circumstances in which knowing from memory all the numbers in the directory would be a necessary bit of knowledge in order to accomplish something of importance in the community. In short, such knowledge would be of value in proportion to its importance for human action. This does not mean that the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake should not be encouraged, but its possession does not make any person better except as it improves his capacity to act.

Knowledge and action

Knowledge is important because and to the extent that it permits human beings to act. But the world for the sake of which people want knowledge and need it, the world in which they shall have to act, is a world which is highly organized, tremendously bureaucratic, primarily technical, basically urban, and institutionalized. Increasingly, and partly by necessity, we must deal with human beings through large associations, bureaucracies, and concentrations of power in various sectors of our society. The freedom to act in such a world increasingly demands the skills needed to work not only within but upon our institutions. Otherwise, we shall not be able to secure in the world those non-moral goods that are essential for the good life. The extension of virtue, which is both the beginning and the end of liberal learning, will be constrained.

Action in our world requires that we take seriously, in a way we have not been disposed to do, the limits of a person's power. Questions of power, of institutional change, of institutional management are of really crucial concern if human beings are to know how to act upon and not simply within their society. The way that we exercise power and understand its nature in the modern world has to be related to institutions. Power belongs to institutions and not to individuals. Individuals may have strength, but it does not add up to much unless they see the exercise of their strength in conjunction with other human beings institutionally ordered so that their collective action begins to have some effect.

In our own day, the flowering of virtue, the advancement of human work, is not to be found in the cultivation of the private man of good taste nor in the retreat of persons into their carefully
cultivated, warm, small, and familial communities away from the demands of the rest of the world. The flowering of virtue is to be found rather in the public man who is an effective force in his community, whether that community be his professional associations, his vocational life, or the narrower community in which he resides. There is very little, however, actually done in American public schools or in colleges of liberal arts to develop persons of public competence in exercising the skills essential to secure the common goods on which our common life must rest. Yet, in my judgment, it is only at this point where the relation between liberal learning and work will be found. In the future, the informing vision of what liberal learning is all about will be found less and less in the conception of the scholar and more and more in the scholar-citizen and in the citizen-scholar. Viewed in this way, it turns out that liberal learning is nonvocational and at the same time, nothing but vocational.

the core of liberal learning

These observations suggest that the core of the new liberal learning is to be found in the social sciences and to some extent in those areas of knowledge directly related to the professions. Really good training in the social sciences permits people a kind of sixth sense of discernment which allows them to read the signs of the times—to sense the state of the world in which they are involved and then to select the places, the times, and the means for action. There is such a thing as what John F. Kennedy called “the hard logic of events,” but there are also such things as the right time, the pregnant time, the appropriate time, and fruitful time. But we cannot know what those times are if we cannot discern the state of our world and the institutions around us in order to select the place and the moment to insert ourselves into those institutions, nor is there any point in doing so if we lack the skills.

It is a defect, however, that the social sciences are thus the core of liberal learning and at the heart of moral education. They have the capacity, at their best, to instruct us in the skills of action. But they are not evocative. They are useful in providing discipline, but they are not very good at providing the images of man, of community, and of the good life—images that are essential if human work is to have any point at all. They free us and extend our power, but they cannot sustain us, because they do not reinterpret for us the classical religious and moral images of man and of society on
which our future, no less than our past, must rest. But most important, they do little, if anything at all, to provide us rootedness in space, in time, or in some moral context. History viewed as a social science is not at all like history as remembered, as cherished, as rejected, or as defining one’s past and future. For these reasons liberal learning requires those aspects of learning that are essentially literary, dramatic, symbolic, and mythic.

If it is thus a defect that the social sciences lie at the core of liberal learning in the modern age, it is also a difficulty that the inheritors of the humanistic tradition have much too seldom addressed themselves to the hard moral choices that human beings actually confront in the realm of public life or in the political and social spheres of action. As a consequence, the humanities and the social sciences have tended to grow apart, and liberal education has failed to be truly liberal. It has failed to enlarge the scope of virtue, to permit human beings to make a world. Instead, at least over the past thirty years or so, liberal learning in the undergraduate college has been predominantly vocational. We have never been able to afford such a luxury, but in the years ahead that fact, though no more true than before, is likely to become increasingly apparent.

references

“Current Reading.” Public Interest, 1974, 35, p. 121.
