Liberalism, Modernity and Liberal Education

TIMOTHY FULLER
Colorado College

The inspiration of liberalism begins from the idea of the natural liberty and equality of all human beings. Within the liberal tradition, we expect liberal education to advance the capacity of human beings to make liberty and equality fruitful without simply identifying with liberalism. Liberalism and liberal education are friendly, without being identical, in sharing a commitment to freedom and human dignity. Both are, however, also bound up with "modernity". The relationship of the liberal tradition, liberal education and modernity is what I wish to explore in what follows.

To thinkers, like Hobbes and Locke, who paved the way toward liberalism, natural liberty and equality meant that there is no necessary ordering of the human character. Human beings so understood find themselves surrounded by a nature which guides only in part, the bulk of the formation of our character requiring active construction through the exercise of intelligence. Conceiving of ourselves this way, we confront a recurrent, vexing problem: How are we to achieve peaceful and virtuous association amidst unboundedly divergent self-interpretations? How do we decide how we ought to live?

Both Hobbes and Locke agree that God made us in his image in making us creative beings. Just as nature is the creator's artifact, so man is the being within nature who can produce further artifacts not made or necessitated by nature. If human artifices were dictated by necessity, they would not be our creations but emanations from antecedent conditions—occurrences independent of human deliberation and will. Artifice implies will, and the reality of will emerges in creative action, the capacity to do what, in the absence of human willing, would never be done. Human beings define human purposes and goals.

This does not mean that we are unlimited. We are, in the Hobbesian-Lockean description, physical, passionate beings, moved by desire and aversion, by pleasure and pain. We also inescapably carry cultural inheritances and habits of understanding. Freedom appears, amidst these limitations, in the exercise of intelligence in imaginatively interpreting and reinterpreting what these conditions mean to us, in discovering possibilities lurking in a resistant environment.

Individuality of meaning asserts itself in the endless adaptations of conventions of expression within societies. Cultural unity is an artifice, a creation of human ingenuity that must be as it is only because it has been made by particular people in particular historically contingent circumstances. Thus, the liberal tradition both acknowledges the artificiality of human associations and also establishes their legitimacy on the ground that they are self-imposed.

Whatever cultural unity we achieve cannot be at the expense of individuals' claims to self-regulation and self-development. Belief in individuality and liberty implies belief in the capacity for self-regulation. The art of the liberal tradition is to strike anew, in every moment, the balance between separation from and association with each other. Whatever balance we strike is informed by an intention to minimize favor to some preferences at the expense of others. Substantive notions of virtue must not be imposed for such imposition endangers individuals' acting as agents of their own destiny.

Liberal individuals are both self-centered and dependent. They find this dichotomous experience both natural and inevitable; yet they also seek a unified experience of the world. The art of life for such individuals is to reconcile the desire for self-satisfaction with the desire for association.

This we must do for ourselves because understanding ultimately resides in individuals and nowhere else. The conventions of association are tenuous but manageable relations among individuals each of whom must engage in a constant process of adjustment to the others.

The tentative nature of this civil association is echoed in the tentative nature of each individual's reconciliation of the self- and other-regarding impulses. Starting from the fundamental individuality of every human being, we must accept that our sociality cannot be actualized without conventions; abandon them and there are no standards other than one's own.

In seeking to define the "praiseworthy", as we must, we are at risk of exalting either mere conformity or mere rebelliousness. Conceptions of virtue vary. The public conception of virtue, being conventional, must alter through time; it cannot remain static. Rather than emphasizing substantive virtue, then, we speak of propriety or self-command, the display of self-restraint, of civility and moderation, the marks of the person who prudently pursues self-development in the company of others.

The liberal outlook, then, seeks virtue without undermining freedom and individuality in the pursuit of self-chosen purposes. The capacity to live this way liberalism ascribes, in principle, to every human being. This is attractive. Yet anxiety arises from the fear of finding no coherent and sustainable cultural expressions, no fit between procedures and substance. To identify moral virtue with civility will not altogether allay the odor of arbitrary definitions or the felt need to reexamine those definitions repeatedly.

The liberal tradition, in short, urges us to our own purposes and ideas of good, admitting a constant proliferation of purposes and goods. Self-expression is intrinsically good, but particular self-expressions, in principle, enjoy no special privileges. The exercise of agency by individuals is intrinsically valuable, but no particular acts of agency are easily or unarguably set apart as exemplary.

Alongside this complex of thought we encounter "modernity". Although occasionally used affirmatively, this term often designates some kind of misdirection in liberalism. Peter Berger (1977) provides us with a particularly lucid description of "modernity". He identifies five dilemmas that "modernity has imposed on human life". They are abstraction, futurity, individuation, liberation and secularization.

Abstraction means the replacement of "concrete and relatively cohesive communities" with overpowering technological, economic, and bureaucratic institutions. *Futurity* means "a transformation in the experience of time" wherein the future bewitches us at the expense of the past and is understood to be "precise, measurable...subject to human control...it is time to be mastered." Clock time dominates, lives become careers, societies become raw material for designs and plans. Futurity dictates "endless striving, restlessness, and a mounting incapacity for repose." The counterculture, Berger argues, was an insurrection "against the tyranny of modern futurity." *Individuation* is the derangement of the art of self-regulation described earlier: As "concrete communities have been replaced by the abstract megastructures of modern society, the individual self has come to be experienced as both distinct and greatly complicated—and, by that very fact, in greater need of the personal belonging which is difficult in abstract situations." That is, the gap between self and other is too wide to permit the moderating response to function adequately. *Liberation* is experiencing everything as a matter of choice, what Berger calls the Promethean element or the multiplication of options and the increasing invisibility of traditions. But, at the same time, the anguish of open-ended choice prompts an attempt to escape from freedom, leaving moderns caught between liberation from fate and the anomie of a life without fate. Finally, *secularization* incites antagonism "to the dimension of tran-

scendence." Secularization "frustrates deeply grounded human aspirations" and particularly "the aspiration to exist in a meaningful and ultimately hopeful cosmos."

Berger's symptoms of modernity convene in the inability of individuals to be able to rely with certainty on any particular interpretation of what the surrounding world is supposed to mean. To be immersed in this condition is to become suspicious of the validity of any self-enactment whatever, sensing that:

The situation of our time
Surrounds us like a baffling crime

Auden's line captures the anxieties Berger investigates. There is, in modernity, no obvious symbolic program encompassing life's pilgrimage. Poetic lines do not interpret and clarify the world—they dramatize the world's opaqueness.

What then of liberal education? In the first place, we must accept that what we have just been describing manifests itself no less in educational institutions than elsewhere. Some of those entering colleges and universities today, it is true, hope to rise above the preoccupations of the age. Many more come in search of a more exact, scientific analysis of modernity in order to succeed on its terms.

This is true not only of students but of faculty who must suffer the temptation to serve contradictory demands simultaneously. In this situation, liberal education risks the loss of its independent meaning or reason to exist. It begins to appeal to prospective students merely as the already familiar world, briefly relieved perhaps of immediate responsibilities, but always mindful of the apparent primacy of those responsibilities. It is no wonder, then, that many come to feel that much in the academy is not really real. Worth is attributed to the evanescent, the contemporary, to knowing very well what everyone thinks now, to learning to think of oneself as a potential manager of a "social system" under the tutelage of a putative "role-model".

There are no easy remedies for reestablishing the distinctiveness of the educational engagement. First, we must try to detach the word "liberal" from the word "modern" in order to recapture its broader, more ancient meaning. From the wandering scholars of the twelfth century, who inaugurated the educational adventure as we have since known it, the renaissance humanists who recovered ancient learning and the natural philosophers of the scientific revolution, modern students are offered a wealth of invitations to explore the languages of learning and the modes of self-understanding. As Michael Oakeshott puts it, learning began to be:

> …identified with coming to understand the intimations of a human life displayed in an historic culture of remarkable splendor and lucidity and with the invitation to recognize oneself in terms of this culture. This was an education which promised and afforded liberation from the here and now of current engagements, from the muddle, the crudity, the sentimentality, the intellectual poverty and the emotional morass of ordinary life (Oakeshott 1989, p. 30).

That what we once called the torch of learning is not snuffed out entirely, we see periodically when, recalling that we used to be about something, we huddle together to conjure it up again. Almost every curriculum has something called a distribution requirement, often tacked on to an increasingly pre-professional, technique-oriented body of courses. We speak often of "general education" as if it were meaningful to say that someone is educated "in general". But "general education" is not necessarily "liberal education" if it implies not liberation from the merely current but liberation from learning anything specific in detail. Committees spend vast amounts of time compiling lists of useful skills, attributes of good socialization, broadening options, and the like. The point is not that these things are in themselves wrong; the point is that these things are nothing in themselves and have no independent status.[1]

Sometimes, no doubt, general education implies concern for the substance of a culture. Too often, however, it means that everything of possible importance is given its curricular moment in the sun, the

student getting no more than a fleeting glimpse of anything in particular. This is education as recognition, what we have taken to calling "cultural literacy", but it is not liberal learning, not an authentic encounter with distinguished thinking and writing.

Put in a positive light, these efforts may be signs that there is hope for us yet, that we have not forgotten completely the exhilaration of the original adventure to understand and not only to understand, but to understand from the vantage point of the highest accomplishments of substantive knowledge, to seek liberation not from culture, but liberation as the freedom to explore forever within a culture, to be at home in it, and yet to know that each particular dwelling shows the mark of its owner.[2] This mode of individuals in association with each other is a high achievement of liberal learning, appearing long before the advent of modern liberalism or of "modernity". Liberal education is not merely modernity intellectualized; it is the experience of that spirit which wants to discover a truly human life and wants to participate in the great conversation respecting the variety of ways to live it. Liberal learning thus understood is not a technique or a list of courses—it is an education in imagination.[3] It is the attempt to broaden our ways of seeing the world, but not by making anything and everything an object of formal study. It is not many objects of study that we require, but the art of imaginative response in encountering expressions which are themselves the consequences of imaginative response.

What, then, should we, as the current trustees of liberal learning, be doing? First, we have to acknowledge that our inheritance is in disarray; this seems increasingly admitted. The burgeoning of "higher education"—not to be equated with liberal learning—has dissolved the common understanding that teachers formerly could assume to exist among themselves. Students quickly learn to exploit the resulting variability in standards, expectations and requirements. In large measure, the blame lies with teachers and not with students. Students respond to what is expected of them, even if often their response is inadvertent. However, when they arrive in colleges and universities today, they are likely to be asked what they would like to find there. They meet teachers who, even if they have high personal standards, may think it wrong to impose those standards on others.

This is exacerbated on the other side by the disastrous gap between the requirements of professional, graduate school training and the requirements of liberal learning. In liberal arts colleges, where we might least expect to find this, it shows up in the fears of young faculty that their professional research will not or cannot be supported. The difficulties of recruiting faculty with a commitment to the traditional priority of excellence in teaching are well known, particularly when the institutions' commitments are equivocal. And, increasingly, teaching institutions succumb to the temptation to allow professional aspirations, emanating from sharply opposed standards of success and reward, to dictate the shape of the curriculum.

The first line of defense of liberal learning is to make sure we are clear about who we are and what we are defending. A clear idea of the college or university is indispensable to preserving it. We must also be willing to assume responsibility to educate newcomers into the traditions of liberal education, without compromise of its idea.

On the other hand, we must also acknowledge the centrality of professional training even though it is not an end in itself. If we are to avoid the spurious general education and transdisciplinary discussions of everything but what we know well, training and continuing research are indispensable. But professional work presents us with two perils: first, it often ignores, or deals superficially with, the distinguishing assumptions of disciplines. The result is too many faculty members who may transmit the present contents of their disciplines but either cannot explain, or are indifferent to the task of explaining, why their disciplines are as they are, their significance, and their limits. Perhaps over the door of each faculty office we should affix the haunting remark of Max Weber: "To choose a method is to choose a way of life." Do we reflect such seriousness in our undertakings?

The second peril follows from the first: Professional training seldom encourages conversation among practitioners of different disciplines. Reluctance to converse must not characterize those committed to liberal education.

The conversational attitude is, I think, the key to understanding the task of liberal education in our current circumstances. That attitude begins in the recognition that we cannot speak in a single voice or rely on a single method of knowing. We are participants in the liberal tradition. The ways of knowing are plural. Inevitably, we must differ, but the faculty of conversability affords us the prospect of difference with a minimum of antagonism. An institution of higher learning should be understood as a great conversation among voices who have learned conversational procedures. A college or university will be truest to itself in attending to its conversational inheritance. Human beings enter the world with the capacity for but not the art of conversation. Insofar as this is among the highest of all human attainments, distinctive to the human species, it is essential to learn how to attain it and thus essential that there be places which, in the midst of all else going on, exemplify it. In conversation, we quickly pass beyond formulas and propositions to the lore that lies behind them. This is the greatest and, in principle, the least dogmatic learning, combining openness with precision. Conclusions are seen to be momentary accomplishments, brief releases from adventurous uncertainty, in the effort of all involved to understand ourselves in relation to what we have so far learned, and in relation to our conversational partners without whose conversational gambits we are diminished.

Academic disciplines, in this view, are voices in a collegial conversation—and to the degree we are conversationally adroit, the students who come our way will know by observation and apprenticeship what is required in a place of learning. If instead we erect intellectual kingdoms of the proud, turning conversation into speeches, we will diminish ourselves and our students, and we will, even if unintentionally, cease to distinguish ourselves from the barbarous of our time who turn every conversational opportunity towards self-assertion. That we are often intimidated nowadays into thinking that the speechmakers are serious while we are inconsequent reasoners, is a sign of our forgetting that the human is to be found in every moment of consciousness, not only in moments yet to come, that if we do not have resources for self-understanding now, they are not likely to be imparted to us later.

What I am proposing is that we seek to transform the curse of indirection in our plurality into a conversational blessing. Diversity guarantees the fecundity of human discovery, allowing us to engage in a continuous endeavor to abate the human mystery by recognizing that each conversational partner may potentially explicate that mystery even while extending it.

In the course of this procedure, we cannot explore all possibilities. Choices to do this rather than that must be made. It is the understanding we bring to the task of choice that is crucial. The metaphor of conversation intends to show that each of us can refer to, and order our work in accordance with, the good of the institution of learning, not under an imperative to sacrifice distinctiveness, but with the understanding that no discipline or conversational voice refutes its alternatives merely by revealing its own premises and asserting them. But each voice can contribute to the enhancement of the faculty of appreciation and enjoyment of the others and, in so doing, enhance itself.

Without foreclosing the future, conversational habits build the bridges among us that create the attractions of the academic institution and make it attractive for beginners to explore. The prospective entrant can then see that, in conversation, each of us begins anew in each moment and here above all, therefore, beginners are welcome. They bring fresh nuance to a long-standing conversation. Here they can test what they have to say not with the promise of a certain destination, but in mastering a way of navigating the sea of human utterance. Here disciplines need not be abstract, futurity can be tempered with the experience of present delight, individuation can be accepted as promoting conversational partnership, not loneliness, liberation is of the imagination, and the aspiration to meaning and hope is neither rendered formulaic nor ruled out but itself becomes a matter to be clarified among conversational partners.

The vocation of the teacher today demands self-confidence in the midst of continual self-examination. Open-ended conversationality, especially to be hoped for in institutions of higher learning, is not an escape from the human condition but the resolve to embrace it in a comprehensive way. It is true that the price of such comprehensiveness is a certain detachment, particularly from political decision-making and prophecy. To some this means that the habits of conversationality are abstract and not those of a fully human life.

This criticism is natural and perennial and requires us always to be ready to assess what we are doing. On the other hand, whatever fate may otherwise befall us, we are the trustees of a reflective insight that is to be had in no other way. So that future generations will know that we have not unwittingly allowed this insight to be lost from sight, we must remember that we are neither mere truants nor mere echoes of modernity. We dwell in places in sight of the latter but set apart for liberal education.

NOTES

1 Oakeshott, who exemplifies liberal and not general education, writes: "A culture is not a set of abstract aptitudes; it is composed of substantive expressions of thought, emotion, belief, opinion, approval and disapproval, of moral and intellectual discriminations, of inquiries and investigations, and learning is coming to understand and respond to these substantive expressions of thought as invitations to think and to believe" (Oakeshott 1989, p. 32)

2 It is hard to know what exactly liberation from culture could mean. A being without culture is not a human being. If it means altering an unsatisfactory situation, where do people suppose the criteria to direct the change come from? Do they not emerge from standards already learned which provide a basis for judging satisfactoriness in the first place? What, in the second place, makes a critique intelligible to others if not a shared experience and discourse that already makes it intelligible? Whatever else is going on, even the process of liberation is and must be within a culture.

3 One finds an excellent evocation of this in Northrop Frye's The Educated Imagination (1964). Recently, many of those unfamiliar with Oakeshott's idea of the "conversation of mankind" have learned of it through Richard Rorty's appropriation of the term, and thus they assume that Oakeshott is a sheer relativist. This is incorrect. Oakeshott has a powerful and constructive political theory about which he is not at all relativist. Oakeshott's point is that the open-ended conversation, where everything is eligible for discussion, is the distinguishing feature of the university, not of all of life nor of politics in particular.

REFERENCES

Berger, P. 1977. Toward a Critique of Modernity. In *Facing up to Modernity*. essay, Basic Books.
Frye, N. 1964. *The Educated Imagination*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Oakeshott, M. 1989. A Place of Learning. In: *The Voice of Liberal Learning*. New Haven: Yale University Press.