

The Place of Liberal Arts in Higher Education Today

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Abstract: One of the greatest debates surrounding higher education since the beginning of its modernization has been related to the contents of the curriculum. The discussion is about whether the classical subjects that began to be studied in the medieval universities should continue to be part of a contemporary system of higher education or not. In this essay I will briefly describe the evolution of the curriculum especially in the United States and analyze, compare and critique the current views regarding what is called liberal arts education.

Keywords: Liberal arts; traditionalists; challengers of tradition; Socratic education

Resumen: Uno de los debates más importantes acerca de la educación superior, desde su modernización, ha estado relacionado con los contenidos del currículo. La discusión versa sobre la pertinencia actual de las asignaturas clásicas que se iniciaron en la universidad medieval. En este ensayo se describe la evolución del currículo.

Palabras clave: Artes liberales; tradicionalistas; progresistas; educación socrática

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The Evolution of Liberal Arts Education

Even though the university has experienced several transformations since its foundation in the Middle Ages, its basic features have remained throughout time. Universities are now, as they were upon their invention, centers of higher learning that have a name and a central location, combine teaching and scholarship, are organized in schools or “faculties”, and have corporate autonomy and academic freedom as their main characteristics (Kerr, 2001; Perkin, 2006). The programs of study in the universities have also evolved throughout time. From the beginning, the idea of the need for certain basic fields of study has been present. The medieval curriculum was based on seven liberal arts (grammar, rhetoric and dialectic, music, arithmetic, geometry and astronomy) that made up the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*. They are the root of what was called for a long time *the liberal arts education* and the basis for higher professional studies, as theology, law or medicine (Perkin, 2006).

For centuries the curriculum of higher education followed this medieval liberal arts scheme and was directed principally to an elite sector of the population who had access to higher education, the educated gentlemen. In America, the requirements of the Industrial Revolution and the influence of the German university started to challenge the need for this type of liberal arts education since the nineteenth century. The university began to evolve and became more oriented to the preparation of students for their professional life and, later, also to scientific research. There were several efforts –as the Yale Report of 1828- to preserve liberal arts education, as a knowledge that was superior to practical studies, because they were an end in themselves (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997).

The rapid development of science at the beginning of the twentieth century and the pragmatism of American life challenged even more the idea of studying “useless” subjects in a university that was preparing young people for a life in a democratic society. While universities became focused on the practical needs of the new American culture, and access to higher education expanded to broader sectors of society, some humanists tried to preserve a traditional approach of the liberal arts. However, what was once considered a liberal arts education did not exist anymore, because the sciences had taken their own independent path. The human studies certainly found their place, although relegated to a few intellectual professions, and not as a requirement for all higher education students.

The pragmatism of certain American philosophers like John Dewey, and the presence of liberalism in philosophy and politics gave new connotations to liberal arts education. Pragmatism was concerned about the relation of theory and practice and thought of liberal arts education not as a constant through time, but as something that necessarily had to change to meet the demands of place

and time. Philosophy and thought were considered by American pragmatists as means for illuminating the problems of the present society. Liberalism saw education as a way of liberating people, by freeing their minds for independent thought (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997).

By the middle of the twentieth century the wars and economic crisis around the world displayed countless unexpected negative human and social consequences of the development of science and technology. Somehow, this suggested the necessity of the human and social sciences, and thus they regained a place in the contemporary university. However, most of the humanities and the arts are in a disadvantaged position regarding faculty salaries, support for research, and prestige within the academic world (Kerr, 2001). In addition to offering degrees in human studies, higher education institutions address liberal arts education in several ways. In some universities, for instance, the study of humanities is part of the core of general education that is required for all students. These courses are employed to engage students in critical thinking, to enable a conversation that values cultural differences, and to relate events from the past, the present and the future in the construction of a democratic society. Conversely, with the crisis of modernity and the rise of diverse lines of postmodern thought, today there are different concepts of what is and what should be taught as humanistic studies in universities. Some of these notions will be analyzed in the following section¹.

Diverse conceptions of liberal arts education

John Searle presents the arguments of a debate between the defenders of a traditional liberal arts curriculum and the challengers of this type of curriculum. After acknowledging that a main part of the discussion is about Western civilization itself, he expresses his disagreement with the way in which the debaters defend their positions, even though he agrees more with the points presented by what he calls “the traditionalists”. The traditional proposal for the teaching of humanities is based on the idea that our culture has received a heritage of many centuries of tradition and that, in order to understand our roots and to be an educated person in American society, one needs to have knowledge of this tradition and be familiar with its most salient philosophical, historical and literary writings (Searle, 2012).

There are several assumptions the traditionalists make, according to Searle, to endorse the inclusion of certain texts in the canon of studies. One is the intellectual merit of the authors and the

¹ Although the notion of liberal education can mean different things in diverse contexts, for the purpose of this analysis it will be used as a synonym of liberal arts education, and it will focus in the study of the Humanities.

historical importance of their work. Another assumption is that there are certain commonly accepted characteristics that imply quality of intellectual work. Additionally, the study of these works helps students to develop a broader world view, as they see themselves as part of a wider tradition and are invited to transcend. Also liberal education would give students the tools to be critical about themselves and their communities. Finally, metaphysical realism is in the base of the Western culture, even though it has been challenged by some schools of thought throughout history.

Conversely, the propositions of the challengers are more varied, but there are some common assumptions that Searle offers in his analysis. First, a great importance is given to each individual's background with regard to race, ethnicity, class and sex, as important features that define self-identity. While traditionalists assign importance to the individual as part of a universal culture, challengers deny the universal, focusing on subgroups. Another characteristic of the challengers' position is the belief that all cultures are intellectually equal and that considering some aspects of a culture superior to those of another culture conveys racism, imperialism and oppression.

Consequently, all cultures should have an equal representation in the canon of texts proposed for college students, and the faculty body should include representatives from every culture. Regarding this issue, traditionalists maintain that the parameter taken into account in the selection of texts and faculty is their quality and not their representativeness as part of a group. Additionally, the purpose of educating in the humanities is, for the challengers, to achieve political transformation. Furthermore, challengers presuppose that objective or inter-subjective standards do not exist and, therefore, they cannot be used to determine the intellectual quality of certain writings, which leads to the exclusion of metaphysical realism. Finally, they assert that in the history of Western civilization, oppression has always been present and power has been exercised especially by white males, which explains why the majority of literary, scientific and artistic works were created by individuals that belonged to this oppressor group.

Searle refutes the vision of the challengers principally by defending metaphysical realism. He claims that the fact that we communicate in a public language, which is used by skeptics and relativists as well, presupposes a public world, a universal basis that corresponds to metaphysical realism. He also challenges the idea of the aims of education being political, because the fact that every human interest can have political consequences does not justify making politics the center of the academic activity. Searle also contests the notion of empowerment of social groups and he suggests that we cannot discredit important philosophical and literary works just because the authors were white males or they belonged to certain social group. Nevertheless, Searle's critique of the traditionalists goes

through a different path, as he criticizes them for their lack of enthusiasm and social strength to propose a strong humanistic education that can trigger real changes in our society.

Martha Nussbaum also makes an analysis of what is understood by liberal education, and what its objectives are. She defends some points of view that resemble those of Searle's traditionalists and others that align more with the challengers'. For Nussbaum, the fact that universities educate citizens is crucial, and higher education should be a cultivation of the whole person for citizenship and for life in general. This cultivation for humanity is related to the idea that human beings are world citizens, who should be able to see themselves not only as belonging to certain group or tradition, but "as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern" (Nussbaum, 1997). This universal citizenship means not only to acknowledge that there are many cultures and that people in each culture act in unique ways and have different values, but to be able to use one's imagination to put oneself in the place of the persons who live according to these different lifestyles.

An important element of liberal education, according to Nussbaum, is the capacity to question one's own traditions and all beliefs in general, in order to examine them and determine if they are logically consistent or have enough proof to be accepted. In this sense, she appeals to Socrates' method of dialoguing and challenging common beliefs. The capacity to think critically is the one that permits people to be involved in true dialogues; thus, the practice of questioning is necessary for every person who wants to live a life that is worthwhile. As this life of questioning is beneficial for democracy, colleges and universities can rely on it for the formation of citizens who are going to make democratic choices in society.

Nussbaum proposes several characteristics that a Socratic education should have. First, it is important that Socratic education be available for every human being, because it is about learning to be truly human. Therefore, all students, and not only an elite, should receive this type of education, along with other specialized studies related to their college degree. Also, access to higher education should be universally accessible, which has been pursued by the United States before many other countries in the world, as a way of strengthening a democratic community.

According to this viewpoint, Socratic education also needs to be personalized, in order to meet each student's individuality. This characteristic has to be taken into account when designing the curriculum and the requirements for diverse groups of students, which does not mean having totally dissimilar objectives, but approaching the general goals from different perspectives. Likewise, liberal education must take into account different norms and traditions in which people from different backgrounds make sense of life and the world. Regarding this proposition, Nussbaum implies that

there is no danger of moral relativism because superior cross-cultural norms should be able to endure criticism and examination.

Another feature of this Socratic liberal education is that books cannot be considered authorities because they are not alive and, thus, cannot think or interact actively with the students. As thought and all the activity of the mind are the main goals of education, books could be used as “reminders of arguing” (Nussbaum, 1997) and they can assist thinkers in the search of different arguments and options. However, they cannot be a substitute for personal search and if their wisdom is sought as an authoritative principle, they can be harmful in education.

In summary, the main purpose of liberal education in Nussbaum’s Socratic proposal is to educate citizens who are able to think for themselves, who argue logically and discriminate logical reasoning from arguments that do not follow a logical form or derive from invalid premises. Nussbaum states that this educational approach can be suspected by some traditionalists that view Socratic arguing as a threat to long-established values or to religious ideals, but she claims that democracy protects private religious choices and people cannot feel disrespected by being asked to argue, in the public debate, with arguments that can be understood by people from diverse traditions. She warns that opposition to this type of education can also come from certain left-wing postmodernists who consider knowledge based on logical argumentation to be a mode used by the protagonists of Western domination. To this argument, she responds that these opponents are going against themselves because part of the oppression has been considering women and minorities incapable of reasoning logically and the Socratic proposal is to free all people to think and reason for themselves.

These warnings proposed by Nussbaum can lead us to wonder if there is really so much of a difference among the supporters of liberal education, to question if there are common stands in the different approaches, and to deliberate about a possible program which encompasses the best of each account. Based on the propositions made by Searle and Nussbaum, and supported by the ideas of some other intellectuals, the following section will compare and contrast some of the characteristics that are assumed to be part of liberal education.

Features of Liberal Arts Education

The first question one could ask when thinking about liberal education is who would be benefited from this type of education. Most of the thinkers that discuss about liberal education concur in the idea that all college students, no matter what degree they are pursuing, should receive a liberal arts

education as a part of their college formation. The proposed reasons why students should study humanities are more diverse, even though everyone agrees that it would lead to personal and societal improvement. Also the different approaches concur in saying that one main purpose of liberal education is to teach students to be critical and think for themselves.

In general, a traditional view is simply that the humanities make students more human and, by doing this, they prepare them to play a role in society (MacIntyre, 1987). One of the claims of traditionalist educators in the humanities is that this type of learning is not necessarily “practical”, but pursues the acquirement of knowledge for its own sake. However, the acquisition of this knowledge and critical thinking are considered as humanizing activities, which will benefit many aspects of students’ lives. Challengers view liberal education as a way of giving students tools against oppression. Nussbaum adds to the notion of being a better human being, the idea that the humanities will shape the individual as a better citizen in a democratic society.

From the beginning, the purpose of a liberal arts education has had an ethical component. The traditional view supports ethics in a moral philosophy that comes from the ancient Greek tradition and is based on metaphysical realism. This understanding is grounded on the principle of the existence of natural law that derives from the specificity of human nature. Among the challengers, some other issues are considered. Rorty (1999) denies the existence of this human nature and supports the ethical value of education on freedom, which is needed for individualization of human beings and their socialization. Additionally, he states that the fate of society is open-ended and the direction in which it can grow is unpredictable, as it depends on the individual choices of numerous people. Appiah (2003) defends a morality of pluralism that is based in the appropriation of each one’s beliefs and values, as a consequence of a personal search and a free choice. However, he does not deny the existence of certain common values, such as honesty, loyalty and kindness, without which human life could not be good. He also states that regarding ethical topics that are unresolved and often polemic, there should be public debate among equals, who would vote to decide what should be taught. For Nussbaum, ethics are also the consequence of self-examination and logical analysis; thus, ethical values should be arguable in order to prove that they are really beneficial to all individuals and their society.

For a traditional conception of liberal arts, the foundation of knowledge and, thus, of education is the search for truth. For this reason, its basis, as stated by Searle, is metaphysical realism. The conviction that knowledge is about discovering the truth regarding human nature and the world’s nature is the departing point for the traditional liberal arts education. For most of the challengers of tradition, the underpinning of liberal education is the search for freedom. As Appiah suggests, “the

key to a liberal education is the development of an autonomous self” (2003) which is necessary for sociality and relationship. Rorty states that inquiry is not about truth as a correspondence to a reality that lies outside the human mind. He affirms that

“if you take care of freedom, truth will take care of itself” (1999). Nussbaum asserts that reasoning through arguments that are objective and free from bias can lead to statements that are considered true. However, she agrees with some postmodern philosophers in stating that a desire for power has been present throughout history in the search for truth. She proposes the search for truth and objectivity in a subtle way, focusing on its search through philosophy.

As mentioned in the previous section, the curriculum of a liberal arts education from a traditionalist point of view has been based, primarily, in the content of certain books that constitute the heritage of centuries of history and culture. MacIntyre and others support this idea with the argument that an educated community is built on the ground of shared values that are somehow present in these writings. In this way, the courses of Philosophy, Literature, History and Art fulfill their humanizing goal through the study of books and works of art. Traditional liberal arts education gives importance to philosophy, as a subject matter that supports the rest of the humanities and provides them tools for critical analysis.

Conversely, challengers do not value history, except as a way of acknowledging the structures of oppression that have configured a civilization that is on its way to liberation. Philosophy and Literature are employed to criticize and deconstruct all previous assumptions of knowledge. Priority is granted to multicultural studies and to the analysis of diverse points of view about topics related to life in society. As Appiah states, the curriculum should acknowledge the existence of different choices and opinions, in order to achieve autonomy, which is the exercise of reason. He also warns against the peril of ethnocentrism that can appear when trying to teach values.

Nussbaum affirms that Socratic reasoning can be taught in any of the human and social sciences. However, like the traditionalists, she considers that Philosophy is the privileged place where critical argument can be intentionally and intensively pursued. However, she emphasizes that Philosophy should not be something so abstract that does not touch any of the issues of the students’ lives, but it should focus on the basic interests of human beings, as some American pragmatists like Dewey and James have recalled.

Another main aspect of the study of humanities refers to who is teaching and which methods are being used. In the traditionalist perspective, the professor is still an authority, not because he is superior to the students, but because he has the experience of having studied the subject matter for a

longer time. The methods employed in class vary significantly depending on the professor, but the nature of the courses presupposes at least reading, analysis and dialogue to promote personal thought and criticism. Books occupy a relevant position in traditional liberal arts education. In the view of the challengers, the instructor is merely a facilitator of dialogue and of knowledge construction, which are performed by the students. In general, the teaching methodology is sought intentionally as a part of what the professor wants to transmit, which can be seen clearly in proposals of critical pedagogy. Nussbaum assigns a vital importance to the instructor, who needs to be provocative and perceptive to stimulate the minds of the students. However, unlike traditionalists, she does not consider the books as a main element of this education. Rorty states that professors should present the results and processes of their own inquiry, without having to conform to an institutional plan or to a larger purpose. He also suggests that at least some enduring relationships between teachers and students should be created during the process of learning, and he adds that these relationships cannot happen between students and the dead people who wrote ancient books.

A Critique of Liberal Arts Education

The revival of the studies of humanities in the United States in the twenty first century is probably a sign of the validity of Socrates' belief that an examined life is a better way of living. The fact that there are different views about liberal education and that there is an interest in the debate about what should be part of the humanities' curriculum proves the importance of philosophy as a force that shapes society and its structures. The philosophy that appears to be now more widely represented in liberal arts education is a postmodern viewpoint that has numerous defenders in the departments of humanities, identified by Searle as challengers of the tradition.

These postmodern thinkers and others who do not identify themselves as postmodern, like Nussbaum, have, in my opinion, a very important contribution for college education. The idea, proposed by Dewey, that philosophy is about the practical things of everyday life, restores philosophy its most humane aspect. The confidence in human capacity to reason and to search for answers to our vital needs and to the problems of our society is what sustains the need for a critical attitude and for openness to thought as the basis of a liberal education.

Another contribution of the postmodern thinkers is the criticism of societal structures where injustice and inequality have been promoted. However, I think there is a problem in the foundations of this criticism and the way in which it is done. It is true that there are many questionable things in our Western history and many of today's problems have their origin in ways of thinking that were

considered immutable at some point in history. Nevertheless, we cannot deconstruct everything and assume that every thinker before us was motivated by bad faith and had oppression as his only interest. The understanding of different mindsets with adjustment to their historical moment should be a required element for analysis and critique. Critical evaluation is important but it cannot imply that every tradition, just because it is a tradition, is suspicious of searching power through oppression of minorities.

It is also necessary to consider that our society is heir of this long tradition of thought and creation of knowledge, without which we would not be able to have the understanding we have now and to produce new knowledge. This may be the main contribution of the traditionalists. Furthermore, as Nussbaum proposes, a humane discernment of our world needs the tradition of the ancient Greek thinkers, founders of the western tradition. Additionally, western Christian values of human dignity are, in most cases, the ones that have made possible the liberation of human beings and their efforts to realize a more fair society.

Appreciation and respect for cultures and lifestyles that are different from ours is another positive feature of the postmodern proposal. Multiculturalism is essential for students to be more solidary and committed to the common good in a global society. However, multiculturalism should not be at odds with ethical universalism. If democracy, as described by some of the challengers, cannot “impose” some permanent moral principles, because this would go against the freedom of choice of its citizens, then Ethical diversity causes a break between public and private moral, which leads to significant problems in society. One consequence of the neutrality of public moral is that usually the position that “wins” is not necessarily the one that is better for the people involved, but the one that can convince better because it appeals to feelings, or because it has a very persuasive logical discourse, even if it derives from false premises. At the end, only certain ideologies are favored.

Where tolerance constitutes the supreme value, it is easy to fall into what has been called the dictatorship of the majority. The politically correct takes the place of the moral good, and the ethical component of education becomes diluted into an effort to make almost everyone feel comfortable with their own choices, except the ones who have strong convictions. These are seen as conservatives, closed minded or dogmatic, and they constitute a new minority, without the privileges other minorities have today because they were oppressed before. Consequently, to achieve an absolutely unbiased mindset is, in my opinion, impossible, even though many people are convinced that they have reached this state of mind.

Although I agree with the pragmatic idea that philosophy needs to address human experience

and the issues of everyday life, I believe that it cannot forego the contemplative tradition. The western philosophical tradition has considered contemplation as a spiritual activity that consists on an awareness of “higher things”, which can only happen through leisure. In a world where life happens at frantic speed and people are too tired to think during their leisure time, it could be a humanizing experience for students to be given this opportunity as a part of their liberal arts education. The need for spirituality is present in young people today as it was before, with the difference that now their ordinary existence gives them less opportunities to develop this aspect of their life.

Following Searle’s view I also think that metaphysical realism is an essential foundation for the humanities. The old principle of non-contradiction is the common ground that enables comprehension among people in society. As Searle poses it, “the commitment is not a specific theory as to *how* the world is but rather that there is a way the world is” (Searle, 2012). Nussbaum also states that “we do not respect the humanity of any human being unless we assume that person to be capable of understanding the basic issues of consistency and validity and the basic forms of inference” (Nussbaum, 1997). Thus, this basic shared understanding is the origin of logical analysis and criticism.

Furthermore, I believe that metaphysics’ role is not only to be an underlying condition for a common understanding, but it should also be studied, because it proposes the meaning and the extent of our own culture. While culture interprets and comprehends reality, metaphysics pursues immediacy, the access to the being of things as they are in themselves (Inciarte & Llano, 2007). Metaphysical pursue is also a way of making contemplation possible, because it frees the mind from the complexities of phenomena and searches the deepest concepts that cannot be represented.

Coming back to a more tangible ground I consider that the individuality of the students is an important factor that has to be taken into account in a liberal arts education. As Nussbaum proposes, education should be personalized, because every student is a human being, distinct from others, with his own needs and ways of knowing. Massification of higher education makes this goal difficult to achieve and thus some departments of humanities are trying to reduce the number of students per classroom, in order to facilitate dialogue and personal analysis. Whithin this setting, professors play a very important role as instigators of the students’ capacity for thought, but also as role models of what an examined life looks like. Deep relationships between a student and certain faculty member cannot only occur in courses related to the humanities, but these are a privileged ground because dialogue happens around the most humane concerns that are studied in college.

To conclude, I will join Searle in his concern about the lack of enthusiasm of the traditionalists. Even though the humanities have revived after having been displaced by science and other “practical”

matters, they no longer occupy the privileged place they had before. It is difficult to find coherent efforts to deliver a real liberal arts education. Even if we were, as Nussbaum suggests, in a privileged moment where humanities are beginning to have an impact in students and professors again, the efforts are disperse. Moreover, the pervasiveness of certain postmodern week ideologies does not give students the necessary convictions to make commitments for the sake of the common good. Like Nussbaum, I think we need to cultivate for humanity, but this cultivation has to be rooted in the nature of human beings in order to be fruitful.

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