

Liberal Education, the Virtues, and Newman's "Lead, Kindly Light"

Leo-Francis Daniels, of the Pharr Oratory

Today, liberal education is threatened by progressive educators who, not understanding either the history or the intrinsic value of classical liberal education, try to recast liberal learning as a utilitarian activity in response to pragmatic demands for utility and productivity. Such educators, first, give lip service to liberal education and, later, willingly dismiss its relevance by trying to repackage it for the marketplace (Jalbert, 2009). Aristotle, John Henry Newman, and Jacques Maritain—among others—have unequivocally vouched for the superior value and primordial importance of truth-seeking classical liberal education whose benefits allow a man or a woman to live out fully and completely their human nature. All three philosophers leave a rightful and necessary, yet lower, place for vocational and professional education in terms of practical service for society, making it clear, however, that the ulterior specialized training which may be required to make a living must never imperil the essential aim of education.

Of Aristotle, Newman and Maritain, Maritain alone clearly reserved a noble place for the service occupations warning, all the time, against the encroachment of their inferior skills upon liberal education's consuming concern for knowledge of objective reality. Maritain's distinctive sympathy toward vocationalism gave professionalism a respected—although qualifiedly—place in education, without retracting, in any way, liberal learning's rightful claim to authoritative academic superiority and excellence. Maritain's liberal education curriculum made allowances for work to earn a livelihood, as he explained in *Education at the Crossroads* (1943):

The utilitarian aspect of education—which enables the youth to get a job and make

a living—must surely not be disregarded, for the children of man are not made for aristocratic leisure. But this practical aim is best provided by the general human capacities developed. (Maritain, 1943, p. 10)

Intrinsic value of the intellect: Striving for truth for truth's own sake. Against the Sophists who argued for an education and learning for the expressed purpose of achieving worldly success, Aristotle contended that the heart of education should be learning for learning's own sake. Newman phrased Aristotle's thought a bit differently calling liberal education a learning that is "not only an instrument, but an end" (Newman, 1907a, p. 112). Aristotle expressed the notion of *striving for truth for truth's own sake* in his *Metaphysics*:

But the science which investigates causes is also instructive, in a higher degree, for the people who instruct us are those who tell the causes of each thing. And understanding and knowledge pursued for their own sake are found most in the knowledge of that which is most knowable (for he who chooses to know for the sake of knowing will choose more readily that which is most truly knowledge, and such is the knowledge of that which is most knowable); and the first principles and causes are most knowable; for by reason of these, and from these, all other things come to be known, and not these by means of the things subordinate to them. (*Metaphysics*, 1.1.982a-982b)

For Aristotle, the goal for education is the same as the goal for human beings. Education is for human self-realization, so that, when human beings are being fulfilled according to their human nature, they are being directed, implicitly or explicitly, toward the achievement of their human ideal. Education, therefore, is essential to all human

beings for it leads them toward the supreme good in which all human beings find their happiness (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.10. 1099b11-12; 1.11.1100b9-10; and 1.13.1103a4-5).

The Intrinsic value of the will: Choosing the greatest good. The happy man or woman is the human being who is both habituated (educated) in acquiring knowledge and habituated in choosing greatest good: Virtue—habit of doing good—is so intimately related to education that it might rightly be said that ethics and education become subsumed into one another. To read one of Aristotle’s ethical works is to read a manual on how to live as human beings. The moral and intellectual virtues, although necessary to human beings, are not naturally part of human nature; as virtues, they must be cultivated by learning and habit:

Intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time) while moral virtue comes about as a result of habit. . . . None of the moral virtues arises in us by nature (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.1.1103a14-19).

The virtues of which Aristotle wrote are intellectual and moral. Moral virtue has to do with feeling, choosing, and acting well; as, for instance, the moral virtues of courage and temperance. The intellectual virtues are qualities of mind developed through instruction; as, for example, the intellectual virtues of practical skill, knowledge, common sense, intuition, wisdom, resourcefulness, understanding, judgment, and cleverness. According to Aristotle, intellectual virtue is superior to moral virtue (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 10, 7). Ralph McInerny (1982) and Leo Strauss (1953), Catholic and atheist philosophers, respectively, agree with intellectual virtue’s superior ranking.

In *The Idea of a University*, Newman takes pains to explain that liberal knowledge

acquired by means of university liberal education has nothing directly to do with moral virtue. For this reason, Newman makes clear that the purpose of liberal knowledge is not, like religious knowledge,

to make men better; . . . this I will not for an instant allow. . . . I consider [liberal] knowledge to have its end in itself . . . [and] I insist . . . that it is . . . a mistake to burden [liberal knowledge] with virtue or religion. . . . The direct business [of liberal education] is not to steel the soul against temptation or to console it in affliction. . . . Taken by and in itself, liberal knowledge as little mends our hearts as it improves our temporal circumstances. Knowledge is one thing, virtue is another; good sense is not conscience, refinement is not humility, nor is largeness and justness of view faith. Philosophy, however enlightened, however profound, gives no command over the passions, no influential motives, no vivifying principles. Liberal Education makes not the Christian, not the Catholic, but the gentleman. It is well to be a gentlemen, it is well to have a cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid, equitable, dispassionate mind, a noble and courteous bearing in the conduct of life;—these are the connatural qualities of a large knowledge; they are the objects of a University; I am advocating, I shall illustrate and insist upon them; but still, I repeat, they are no guarantee for sanctity or even for conscientiousness, they may attach to the man of the world, to the profligate, to the heartless,—pleasant, alas, and attractive as he shows when decked out in them. Taken by themselves, they do but seem to be what they are not; they look like virtue at a distance, but they are detected by close observers, and on the long run; and hence it is that they are popularly accused of pretence and hypocrisy, not,

I repeat, from their own fault, but because their professors and their admirers persist in taking them for what they are not, and are officious in arrogating for them a praise to which they have no claim. (Newman, 1907a, pp. 120-121).

By this Newman does not, in any way, minimize moral excellence nor does he relegate morality to the domain of intellectual excellence; rather, Newman simply attempts to place the intellectual and the moral, respectively, each in its own proper sphere.

Catholic university educators concerned with the ethical formation and moral life of their students look to Newman to answer whether or not intellectual education about virtue and the moral life can result in a veritable moral change in the life of young university learners. This question can be answered appropriately by first making clear Newman's notion of university liberal education and its effects on the learner:

An assemblage of learned men, zealous for their own sciences, and rivals of each other, are brought, by familiar intercourse and for the sake of intellectual peace, to adjust together the claims and relations of their respective subjects of investigation. They learn to respect, to consult, to aid each other. Thus is created a pure and clear atmosphere of thought, which the student also breathes, though in his own case he only pursues a few sciences out of the multitude. He profits by an intellectual tradition, which is independent of particular teachers, which guides him in his choice of subjects, and duly interprets for him those which he chooses. He apprehends the great outlines of knowledge, the principles on which it rests, the scale of its parts, its lights and its shades, its great points and its little, as he otherwise cannot apprehend them. Hence it is that his education is called *Liberal*. A habit of mind is formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are,

freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom; or what in a former Discourse I have ventured to call a philosophical habit. This then I would assign as the special fruit of the education furnished at a University, as contrasted with other places of teaching or modes of teaching. This is the main purpose of a University in its treatment of its students. (Newman, 1907a, pp. 101-102).

The university and the acquisition of knowledge. With regard to the acquisition of a healthy liberal or *philosophical habit of mind*, student success, according to the just-cited Newman text, appears likely, given an assemblage of competent educators with a classical liberal education background and learners with a hunger for truth and knowledge. A philosophical habit of the mind is concerned with an intellectual virtue that facilitates the acquisition of knowledge.

The university, virtue, and moral change. With regard to the university's ability to elicit moral change in the learners, Newman's caution is arresting:

Quarry the granite rock with razors, or moor a vessel with a thread of silk; then may you hope with such keen and delicate instruments as human knowledge and human reason to contend against those giants, the pride and passion of man.

(Newman, 1907a, p. 121)

“Pride and passion” are representative of the moral life gone astray and those “keen and delicate instruments of human knowledge and human reason” are insufficient in themselves alone to right and make the human being virtuous or morally good: To attempt to form a human being morally with human knowledge and human reason is like trying to mine granite with a razor or anchor the “Titanic” with a silken thread.

Liberal education helps the conscience to become better arranged. Newman,

therefore, contended that knowledge, human reason, and the intellect (philosophical habit of the mind) are insufficient in themselves to deal with the distortions and emotional weight of pride and passion that bind up the human soul in a destructive web of habits hostile to our nature. Yet, since the soul's practical intellect serves to better arrange the individual conscience, former biases and distortions resulting from a poorly nourished human will can become weakened and disarmed, acquiring, instead, a positive susceptibility to change or conversion (Newman, 1900, *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*). Newman saw that practical rewards could be created by the educated civility of the gentleman and lady; yet, he was also aware that such cultivated habits would not necessarily mean that the so-called gentleman would be acting out of Christian love for his neighbor, even though knowledge of the proper way to act and of the correct thing to say might qualify him as a gentleman among the well-bred and respectable in society (Begley, 1993).

As a finishing school might turn a teenage girl into a socially acceptable lady, without God and religion that teenager will not become a Christian lady who loves her neighbor on God's authority. According to Newman, it is unrealistic to expect a classical liberal education to form learners adequately in the moral life even in universities possessing a competent theological faculty, for the university is primarily concerned with the intellect while morality is concerned with religion, a relationship with God, with the Church, with truth, with catechesis, with kerygma, and with the proper formation of the human faculty of the will. The following verses of Newman's hymn "The Pillar of Cloud"—popularly known as "Lead, Kindly Light"—poignantly describe how the "intellect-will" dynamic and dialogue operated in his personal life:

1. Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom,

Lead thou me on

The night is dark, and I am far from home.

Lead thou me on.

Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see

The distant scene; one step enough for me.

2. I was not ever thus, nor prayed that thou

Shouldst lead me on;

I loved to choose and see my path; but now

Lead thou me on.

I loved the garish day, and, spite of fears,

Pride ruled my will: remember not past years.

3. So long thy power hath blest me, sure it still

Will lead me on

O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent, till

The night is gone.

And with the morn those angel faces smile

Which I have loved long since, and lost awhile.

This hymn, composed June 16, 1833, bespeaks the outcome of a long and painful mental and spiritual struggle. “Encircling gloom” is the result of Newman’s having made decisions on his own, without making use of God’s “kindly light”. Newman acknowledged his personal responsibility for his “dark night” and his deep sense of alienation ending up with his being “far from home”; *i.e.*, far from God. Deep within,

Newman knew all the while that something was not quite right, for he speaks of “fears”, or of an unsettled conscience, whose incoherence he blotted out by a love of things “garish”. Newman described finally how the will is related to sin by frankly stating: “Pride ruled my will”.

Newman also showed how the human intellect seeks to quiet itself by accumulating knowledge “for the sake of intellectual peace”, working conjointly with the human will to identify the true good (Newman, 1907a, pp. 101-102). Newman showed how his will, characterized here by a perverse selective inattention to God’s “kindly light”, maintained his morbid focus, instead, on his own subjective purposes.

Newman’s thankfulness to the “Kindly Light” in his search for the truth, accentuates liberal education’s intrinsic value by establishing the importance of experiencing joy and/or grief at finding or doing the objectively *right thing*—something lacking in the narrow focus of specialized or professional education. Thomas McCambridge (1997) addressed liberal education’s intrinsic value in the following way:

To understand *why* something should be done is the key to being a rational animal. And to ask “Why?” is to ask “What is the good life?” The pursuit of answers to that question is the purpose of liberal education; on this view, there is no such thing as pure utility, for everything is always done for a reason, and it is the reason that really matters. The acceptance of this causal connection prompted Aristotle to assert that “pleasure induces us to behave badly, and pain to shrink from fine actions. Hence the importance (as Plato says) of having been trained in some way from infancy to feel joy and grief at the right things: true education is precisely this” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1104b). (McCambridge, 1997, p. 21)

The experience of liberal education alone can evoke convictions of the value of a liberal education as a good and necessary thing. To defend this seeming tautology, McCambridge (1997) argued

that only liberal education can be a justification for liberal education; that is, that only the experience of a liberal education can convince individuals of their birthright to freedom, of their rights and obligations as free persons, and of the horrors of any kind of slavery, no matter how comfortable. (p. 152)

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Leo-Francis Daniels is a Catholic priest of the Congregation of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri of Pharr, Texas. He is provost of the Pharr Congregation of the Oratory and headmaster of its bicultural, international school system with campuses in Pharr, Texas, USA (Oratory Academy and Oratory Athenaeum for University Preparation) and in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, Mexico (Instituto Newman del Oratorio de San Felipe Neri).

Very Rev. Leo-Francis Daniels, C.O.

Pharr Oratory of St. Philip Neri

P.O. Box 1698

11317 South Jackson Road

Pharr, Texas 78577