

Rethinking the Concept of Liberal Education in the Age of the Free Economy

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The term “liberal” in the phrase “liberal education” depends implicitly for its sense upon a contrast with the realm of practical activity. The ancient construction of the concept drew a distinction between “liberal” and “servile,” and the contemporary distinction between liberal and career-oriented education remains entangled with this distinction. In what ways must we rethink the concept of liberal education if the concept of “servility” no longer describes adequately the world of work in a market economy? As the domain of work acquires a higher degree of freedom and participates more directly in the ethical responsibility to serve the common good, and as many types of work become linked more extensively to knowledge, it becomes necessary to think in fresh ways about the concept of liberal education and about the relationship between liberal and career-oriented education.

This is not to suggest that the traditional concept of liberal education has become outmoded and has lost its value in a world largely dominated by economic drives and demands. It will not be possible to fulfill the potential for higher levels of dignity in work and for a greater degree of freedom and ethical responsibility in the market economy unless we continue to cultivate the intellectual powers that stand behind the practices of the contemporary workplace, and unless we continue to insist upon the wisdom of the saying that “the human person works in order to live and does not live in order to work.” We might say that the social and cultural power that resides in economic forces in the contemporary world establishes an urgent need for educational institutions to foster intellectual, ethical, aesthetic, and spiritual values sufficiently strong to balance and limit the economic values promoted by the market economy. We are in need of a clear and fresh vision of the relationship between liberal and career-oriented education, and we need especially to understand the ways in which the dynamic interaction between these two modes can be mutually enriching.

We could consider it a blessing, then, that much attention has been paid in the recent tradition of Catholic social thought to the new dimensions of personal and social value inherent in contemporary work and in the contemporary market economy. We find especially in several encyclicals of Pope John Paul II a critical reappraisal of the role of human work and of the market economy in relation to freedom and human dignity. The opportunity is at hand to take a fresh look at the connections between liberal and career-oriented education in the light of this reconceptualization of the economic sphere.

This paper will first consider some of the problems that arise from the ancient distinction between the terms “liberal” and “servile” and from the assumptions concerning social class that become linked with the concept of liberal education in Cardinal Newman’s view of liberal education presented in *The Idea of the University*. We will then consider

the new importance and value of work as presented in some of the encyclicals of Pope John Paul II, and demonstrate ways in which we might envision the dynamic interplay between liberal and career-oriented education. The paper will conclude with observations concerning the need to limit and resist the social and cultural power of the market economy in the contemporary culture of consumerism, and will suggest that the link between liberal and career-oriented education should be pursued in a manner that overthrows or at least mitigates the negative values of consumerism.

The acceptance of slavery as a part of the social and economic order in the ancient Greek world gives rise to the suspicion that the ancient concept of liberal education is unforgivably tainted by its dependence upon the institution of slavery. If liberal education were to exist only at the cost of enslaving other human beings whose labor provides the leisure that allows the pursuit of truth for the few who are free, then such education would be repugnant.

This charge, however, is too broad to withstand scrutiny. Philosophy and education are surely not the dominant social powers that themselves gave rise to an institution such as slavery for their support, even if the formation of those concepts will carry some mark from the cultural assumptions that hold slavery in place. Moreover, if we judge all ideas and cultural products to be invalidated when they come to appearance in a culture that supports practices we no longer tolerate, it is hard to see what ideas in any historical or cultural period could retain their validity. However, it is clear that most cultural and political concepts will be affected to some degree by the assumptions that hold an institution such as slavery in place, and that the impurity that flows into such concepts from the acceptance of slavery needs to be scrutinized and brought into question as we carry the concepts forward into our own cultural atmosphere. Must the separation between liberal education and the economic order be held as sharply as the ancient distinction between liberal and servile activity would suggest? The cultural progress that is marked by the expansion of freedom beyond the narrow social boundaries within which it was available in other cultural periods is legitimately marked by an expansion of the availability of liberal education and by a new need to examine more closely the interrelationships between liberal education and the world of work.

We find similar cultural problems attached to the idea of liberal education as articulated by John Henry Cardinal Newman in *The Idea of a University*. Cardinal Newman's description of the liberally educated person as a "gentleman" understandably irritates many readers today because of the assumptions concerning class and gender reflected (and not subtly) by the term. Once again it is important to identify the manner in which assumptions concerning class and gender might have tainted Cardinal Newman's presentation of the concept of liberal education, while at the same time we should remain open to the enduring value of the concept.

The most important quality of the traditional concept of liberal education is its recognition of the intrinsic value of the human powers that are cultivated through liberal education and its vision of the fulfillment of such powers as intrinsically good, to be valued for its own sake and not only because the cultivation of our intellectual powers

turns out to be useful in our practical activities as well. If the concept of a fulfillment that is intrinsically good falls flat upon contemporary ears, we should recall immediately that the traditional concept of liberal education includes recognition of the social nature of the human person, so that the fulfillment at stake carries social as well as individual value. The traditional concept of human fulfillment through liberal education retains its vitality even if earlier thinkers were too narrow in their vision of the range of human beings who should be entitled to pursue such fulfillment, and we should remain open to appropriate modifications in the concept as we seek to dissolve artificial boundaries of race, class, and gender that have unnecessarily restricted the range of the concept.

In spite of the problems caused by assumptions concerning class and gender in Cardinal Newman's concept of liberal education, we should emphasize one important way in which he alters the traditional concept of liberal education to enable it to fit better contemporary views of the dignity of the human person. The ancient concept was built on the assumption that human reason is itself the source of human dignity, and this assumption accorded well with the acceptance of slavery as a social institution since servility was seen as the natural situation of a human person who did not possess a sufficient power of reason to establish a free life. Many types of work would then be termed "servile," and the relationship between liberal education and servile work would be the political problem of the relationship between ruler and ruled. Christianity brought into the world a radical new concept of the dignity of the human person, a concept that has slowly become established in many world cultures for the last two thousand years. Christianity sees dignity in the human person as an image of God, and our capacity to bear such an image is not linked to our competence in theoretical or practical matters. The fulfillment of human potential that is the aim of liberal education remains something good in itself, but such fulfillment is not the source of goodness and human dignity is not restricted only to those who accomplish such fulfillment. As the recognition of this truth blossoms in human culture, the relationship between liberal education and the world of work takes on a different quality because the concept of the common good takes on a different quality.

The concept of servility itself is transformed by Christianity into the concept of service, and this revolution of values has important implications for our understanding of liberal education. Plato recognized that philosophers--those who had achieved the highest degree of liberal education--carried political responsibility to the city and should be required to go back down into the cave to rule after fulfilling themselves with contemplation of the good. This responsibility, however, differs from the Christian concept of service which recognizes to a greater degree the essential dignity of all human persons and the new vocation of service to the common good according to the model established by Jesus Christ.

Liberal education within a Christian context brings us to a new horizon of possibilities for liberal education while still preserving many of the core values of the traditional concept. The Christian concept of service makes us all the more aware that the individual fulfillment accomplished through liberal education is in the service of the common good. If human fulfillment depends more upon love of one's neighbor than upon the cultivation

of reason, then the cultivation of reason comes to its proper completion in the service of the common good. If work can be understood as service and not as servility, then work also comes to its proper completion in the service of the common good. Here, then, we encounter the zone of intersection between liberal education and the world of work: each can be understood in relation to the concept of serving the common good, and each area of activity illuminates the other by disclosing more fully the proper end of education and work in the pursuit of the common good.

The transformative power of the Christian value of service opens an important new perspective on the relationship between liberal education and work. A second path toward such a new perspective becomes evident when we consider the way in which many types of work have been transformed in the market economy: once work is released from the concept of servility, the role of human choice in work establishes an ethical dimension in the workplace, while the role of prudence and thought in work establishes a rational and intellectual dimension. To the extent that work can be rightly viewed as an exercise of human freedom, the root sense of freedom conveyed by the term “liberal” can be seen as pertaining to work as well as to liberal education. Again we encounter new reasons for seeking a fuller relationship between liberal education and the world of work, and within the academy this points us toward the search for a closer relationship between liberal education and career-oriented education.

We must immediately question at this point whether it is truthful to say that work in the market economy is actually understood as service to the common good, whether work is an exercise of human freedom, and whether many types of work can be rightly regarded as relying upon the exercise of intellect. Has capitalism merely replaced the ancient institution of slavery with a new form of enslavement disguised in the form of labor for wages practiced by the many who are then ruled over by and in the service of the wealthy few? Is liberal education combined with career-oriented education merely a modern form of education that serves the interests of the new rulers of the economic order in their effort to maintain domination over workers? Questions and doubts such as these—and there are reasons to regard these as good questions and as well-grounded doubts—stand in the way of any effort to build a closer relationship between liberal and career-oriented education.

Liberal and career-oriented education can stand in fruitful dialogue only if they join together in the effort to orient economic activity toward service of the common good, only if they illuminate the ethical dimension in the workplace, and only if they protect the dignity of all human work as an exercise of human freedom.

This is why Catholic universities have a special opportunity to forge a new relationship between liberal and career-oriented education. Catholic universities can draw simultaneously upon the long tradition of respect for and cultivation of the intellect that is a distinctive mark of Catholicism and also upon the recent tradition of Catholic social thought that envisions the best and noblest possibilities available in the market economy and seeks to make those best possibilities the new daily life of the economic order. Liberal and career-oriented education joined in fruitful dialogue offer the best

opportunity available to us to infuse the economic order with the values and sense of purpose that will enable it to serve the common good instead of merely serving the interests of the wealthy.

Pope John Paul II offers an incisive analysis of the challenge we now face as we seek to fulfill the best possibilities of the market economy while striving also to overcome the dangers posed by the misuse of economic power in the contemporary world. Should capitalism be commended as the economic system best capable of serving the needs of the human family, especially the needs of underdeveloped countries seeking the best path toward progress and development? The answer given to this question in *Centesimus Annus* is carefully qualified:

If by “capitalism” is meant an economic system which recognizes the fundamental and positive role of business, the market, private property and the resulting responsibility for the means of production, as well as free human creativity in the economic sector, then the answer is certainly in the affirmative, even though it would perhaps be more appropriate to speak of a “business economy,” “market economy” or simply “free economy.” But if by “capitalism” is meant a system in which freedom in the economic sector is not circumscribed within a strong judicial framework which places it at the service of human freedom in its totality and sees it as a particular aspect of that freedom, the core of which is ethical and religious, then the reply is certainly negative. (Section 42)

The economic order is not to be judged solely on the basis of its efficiency or productivity, and it must be held tightly in relationship to higher values that govern its activity. Economic activity should be understood in accordance with the Christian value of service, and is seen here as “at the service of human freedom in its totality...” If by “career-oriented education” we mean education in the true meaning of economic activity in its orientation to freedom and in its dedication to authentic service, then it is clear that a close relationship between liberal and career-oriented education would best enable our students to enter the marketplace with a proper understanding of economic activity. Moreover, the practical, ethical, and intellectual challenges that come to light in the daily struggle to engage in economic activity in a manner that serves human freedom and the common good would provide important material for reflection to teachers in the liberal arts. Liberal and career-oriented education when joined together to bring about the cultural transformation of the economy envisioned by John Paul II would prove to be mutually enriching.

John Paul seems to call for such a joint effort in the work of culturally transforming the economic order when discussing the role of Catholic social teaching in contributing to social and economic development. He emphasizes that the Church has no new models of economic order to present, calling instead for persistent and cooperative efforts to link together the “social, economic, political, and cultural aspects” of contemporary problems in the search for just solutions:

For such a task the Church offers her social teaching as an indispensable and ideal orientation, a teaching which, as already mentioned, recognizes the positive value of the market and of enterprise, but which at the same time points out that these need to be oriented towards the common good. (Section 43)

Catholic social teaching itself comes to light here as a connecting link between liberal and career-oriented education, since such teaching engages both the theoretical disciplines of the liberal arts and the practical disciplines that pertain more directly to economic and political activity.

It is also striking that John Paul recognizes both the increased importance of the social or communal aspect of contemporary work and the increased importance of knowledge in contemporary work. His insight into the increasingly communal aspect of work points to the growing awareness in our world of the global implications and entanglements of economic activity:

In our time, the role of human work is becoming increasingly important as the productive factor both of nonmaterial and of material wealth. Moreover, it is becoming ever clearer how a person's work is naturally interrelated with the work of others. More than ever, work is work with others and work for others: it is a matter of doing something for someone else. (Section 31)

As we recognize more fully the social and communal aspects of work, we also come to fuller awareness of the cultural context of work, of the way in which work is embedded in human systems of language, symbol, exchange, communication, interpretation, analysis, and value. Here also we encounter territory where liberal education with its exploration of the roots of human symbols and meaning of all types comes together with the realm of practical activity in a manner that can prove to be mutually illuminating.

It is becoming increasingly common now to recognize the value of "intellectual capital" in the market economy, and John Paul has also marked out this insight in incisive terms:

Whereas at one time the decisive factor of production was the land, and later capital—understood as a total complex of the instruments of production—today the decisive factor is increasingly the person, that is, one's knowledge, especially one's scientific knowledge, one's capacity for interrelated and compact organization, as well as one's ability to perceive the needs of others and to satisfy them. (Section 32)

Here again the close interrelationship between liberal education and career-oriented education comes to light, since the intellectual cultivation provided by the practice of liberal education turns out to have strong relevance also to the world of work in which knowledge plays an increasingly important role. Dialogue between teachers in the central disciplines of the liberal arts and teachers in areas more fully oriented toward the realm of practice would provide new illumination of the nature, significance, and promise of human knowledge.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to developing a closer relationship between liberal and career-oriented education is the need strongly felt by many teachers to resist the pervasive and dangerous power exerted by the culture of consumerism, especially in contemporary American life. The culture of consumerism projects all values as values of the marketplace, linked to the satisfactions of purchasing and consuming, and determined in their essential quality as values by their satisfaction of needs felt by the human person cast into the role of consumer. Since the culture of consumerism emanates from the market economy and seems at times to be actively promoted by business interests as the primary or even sole source of value in the culture, many teachers balk at the suggestion that liberal and career-oriented education should join more closely in dialogue to seek out mutual illumination. Do not our students already place too much emphasis on their own willing participation in the culture of consumerism, some of them viewing education as little more than the acquisition of the power needed to expand their capacity for consumption in the future? If universities, along with churches and other religious institutions, arts institutions, and families should be providing alternative and more significant sources of value to mitigate the power of consumerism, why should we risk the dilution of these alternative values by drawing more closely to the disciplines and practices linked to the market economy?

This is a daunting challenge, and can be met only if teachers in all academic disciplines join together to reach agreement concerning the excesses and dangers of the culture of consumerism and make it clear to students that career-oriented education is a search for work as a vocation of service, not a path toward attaining a position of power in the culture of consumerism. Once again, John Paul II in *Centesimus Annus* provides a basis in Catholic social thought for a unified effort undertaken by all members of Catholic universities to overcome the culture of consumerism: “It is therefore necessary to create lifestyles in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness, and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine consumer choices, savings, and investments” (Section 36). Here we find the traditional transcendent values of the liberal arts—truth, goodness, beauty—linked directly to the activities of the marketplace in the shaping of a human life. Only the collegial efforts of teachers in the liberal arts and teachers in disciplines more directly oriented toward career preparation could hope to accomplish such an important goal in opposition to the powerful forces of many people in the mass media, in business, in politics, and often in our educational institutions as well.

Liberal education and career-oriented education will draw closer together and enter into more fruitful dialogue when they are understood as united in a crucial task of cultural transformation that is respectful of both intellect and the world of practical activity. In Catholic universities, Catholic social thought provides the material and the challenge to activate the dialogue among teachers and to guide the action of cultural transformation. Indeed, the Catholic nature of a university will assume a stronger and fuller manifestation when teachers in the business disciplines, in the social sciences, in the humanities and fine arts, in education, and in the physical and mathematical sciences learn to engage together in the examination and application of the insights of Catholic social thought.