Learning to Flourish:

A Philosophical Exploration of Liberal Education

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(This paper is essentially a distillation of my recent book by the same title. This seems appropriate, not only because—judging from sales—it is unlikely you have read the book, not only because it references St. John's College, but primarily because it addresses directly the central question of this conference: the purpose of liberal education. From lecturing about these ideas on other campuses, I have, however, learned much that will shape this presentation.)

I believe it is mistake to tout liberal education as an ideal, an archetype of education that is defined by specific content (whether by component disciplines, by its curriculum, or by a list of "essentials of cultural literacy"), by distinctive pedagogical methods or techniques, or by institutional type. All these have morphed through history in response to intellectual, social/cultural, and technological changes. To elevate some particular iteration of liberal education as the Platonic ideal is to misunderstand and misdirect both our philosophical and our educational tasks.

Rather, liberal education should be understood as a tradition of educational theory and practice—not in the sense of a hoary set of inherited rituals that we must preserve, but as a vital and still-evolving tradition. What distinguishes this tradition from others is its supreme aim: *the purpose of liberal education is the development a compelling conception of a flourishing life and the cultivation of such a life.*

"Flourishing" has both subjective and objective markers. I would identify the subjective markers as a general satisfaction with one's life as it is and an identification with that life; the objective markers are the possession of the capacities and goods that conduce to and extend the subjective markers. "Flourishing" requires the ability to function with excellence and efficiency in the world.

This is a eudaimonistic account developed within the Aristotelian tradition, but I do not wish to carry all of Aristotle's intellectual baggage. Critics might claim that I am smuggling in the notion of "the good life"—an aristocratic, hegemonic, sexist, and racist view of what life is best; a prescriptive vision that arrogantly assumes the moral and intellectual authority of educators and the righteousness of their efforts. I reject these misunderstandings of my meaning. I do not mean that developing a conception of a flourishing life requires the apprehension of a pre-existing ideal; nor do I imply that there is a single, universal vision of such a life. This goal is an individual achievement, though it affects and is influenced by others, and the result is a diversity of visions. Moreover, the hard-won understanding of flourishing one achieves will likely evolve with life's passages and later learning—it continues as an infinite task. It

is another deeply misconception to assume that the quest for a flourishing life, the well-springs of liberal education, arise only in situations of elite privilege and comfort. Concern for one's life and its prospects may arise in reflective solitude, amidst crippling poverty, in despair, when resplendent ideals of the good life have been shattered, even after great horror.

On the other hand, I do accept the Aristotelian claim that a flourishing life implies sources, supports, arenas, and engagement that are communal. And, as he noted, there is no guarantee that learning to flourish will guarantee a flourishing life; success is contingent on luck and other factors beyond human control. Nonetheless, adopting such an aim governs many aspects of our experience and in so doing shapes our life and identity.

Taking seriously the hope of a flourishing life leads immediately to questions about the components of and effective ways to prepare for and cultivate such a life. Grappling with these large questions leads to others: *What is the human condition? What are our prospects? Who am I and who might I become? What is my relationship to others and what may I learn from their experience? What can I do in the world?* Understanding how we might flourish requires knowledge of what is, what might be, and what ought to be. Navigating this network of profound queries from different vantage points, theorists of liberal education developed what I will call paradigms. These comprehensive visions set polarities in the philosophy of education, establish subsidiary aims, generate forms of educational discourse, inspire curricula, and guide pedagogy.

There are, or so I have dscerned, five historical paradigms of liberal education. They are not ordered in revolutionary succession like Kuhnian paradigms; rather they are co-present, competing, and sometimes conflicting. Each paradigm privileges certain intellectual skills and virtues; each proffers a distinctive form of liberation and vision of the educated person; each has its own liabilities. Much of the dynamism of the tradition of liberal education is produced by their shifting dominance and blend. They are all in play today, and most institutions claim to adopt all of them in some distinctive balance. Though they present quite distinct visions of liberal education, I will argue that they ultimately require each other. Here are the five paradigms:

Liberal education is for:

- **the transmission of culture**—for the absorption of the human experience as encoded in "texts";
- **self-actualization**—for the identification, actualization, or creation of a normative self;
- **understanding the world**—for comprehending the facts and forces that shape our lives;
- **engagement with the world**—for active, normative, and effective engagement with the world; and
- **acquisition of the skills of learning** and the disposition to use them.

After a brief characterization of each, I will turn to their relationships, and conclude by consideration how this analysis clarifies our task as educators.

The Transmission of Culture

Culture is not transmitted genetically; it can be preserved across generations only through learning. Both cultural content and its transmission were greatly enhanced by the creation of texts, durable objects that encode human experience. This paradigm harbors the wisdom that absorbing this precious legacy is the best path to a flourishing life, perhaps even a constitutive component of it. More passive interpretations of the paradigm focus on the student's acquisition of this heritage, and therefore privilege skills of comprehension: reading (and intelligent listening and viewing); attention to detail; proficiency in languages; and the skills of explication. More active versions add the need to comment, analyze, critique, and evaluate—even to join the intertextual conversation and contribute texts in one's own voice—and they privilege the additional requisite skills.

Human finitude necessitates some principle of selection: it is not possible to assimilate all texts. Whether one rejects the label of "great works" or not, criteria of "worthiness" under some interpretation must be applied in creating a curriculum. This is the paradigm that undergirds Whewell's "permanent studies," Hutchins' "Great Books," Adler's "Great Ideas," and Oakeshott's "Immortal Conversation."—and the vision of St. John's College. It portrays the liberally educated person as one

who is culturally literate, who knows masterworks and a body of literature, who has facility in multiple languages (symbol systems)—who is, in short, a scholar. This sort of study, its advocates claim, furnishes the mind; its pursuit enlivens the intellect and expands the moral imagination; it is the best strategy for a flourishing life. It offers the student liberation: liberation from a timeless, meaningless, unconstructed present; from parochial prejudice and narrowness of vision; from a solipsistic life.

Self-actualization

Under this paradigm, liberal education is about the awakening and nurturance of latent capacities and qualities with each student that conduce to a normative self. It is a form of perfectionism. It exhibits subtle variations that intimate metaphysical differences in the conception of the self: its aim may be conceived variously as finding or discovering oneself, as self-definition, self-realization, self-actualization, self-formation, or even self-creation. It all begins, of course, with knowing thyself. What does one get from a liberal education? One gets one's self, transformed. As Pindar once wrote, "Become who you are." Thus, liberal learning shapes identity. Self-actualization offers us liberation from confused and imposed identities, from alienation and inauthenticity, from the disappointment of stifled, untested, or suppressed potential. In a flourishing life, one shapes and achieves one's ownmost possibilities.

The curriculum, for this paradigm, is derived not from a canon of treasured works, but from the potential and promise of one's students. In its most elaborated form, the self and its potential are individuated; in simpler (and more practicable) forms, some more generic notion of the self, of human potential, predominates. It is, nonetheless, a view that recognizes, even celebrates, difference and diversity; the desired educational outcomes are suitably particular. It privileges reflection, self-awareness, and the willingness to go beyond one's current comfort zone. What may seem to be self-absorption likely gives way as liberal education reveals the social, communal dimensions of self-actualization, of dependence on others—and their self-actualization—for a flourishing life. An educated person is, therefore, one who is accomplished and authentic, continually engaged in explorations of self-development. This is the paradigm of Froebel and Montessori, of institutions like Summerhill and colleges like Bennington, Hampshire, and Evergreen.

Understanding the World

The focus moves now from the inner life to the outer world: liberal education is aimed at gaining understanding the world in which we live and the forces that shape our lives. It urges us to grasp the world as it is, on its own terms, and not as a projection of our fears and needs; this is a task that has what philosophers call a "mind-to-world direction of fit." We cannot attempt to create a flourishing life if we are ignorant of how the world works, of the natural and social forces that affect our

lives. From our own bodies to the operations of influential institutions, we face the things of this world with wonder, curiosity, care in observation, respect for evidence, perceptivity in theorizing and knowledge-construction—these are among the virtues and skills this paradigm privileges. Success requires far more than the acquisition of facts; we must learn methods of inquiry and acquire cognitive frameworks—and multiples of these are far better than one. The paradigm thus suggests a curriculum that features a breadth of disciplines and seeks integration.

The liberation offered here is from superstition, ignorance, and error; and such understanding can have an emotional impact as well, freeing us from reflexive fear and hostility. The vision of the educated person, now idealized as a polymath, is a person with a supple intellect, with broad interest in and knowledge of the ways of the world, the disciplines, and with currency in the natural and social sciences.

Engagement with the World

The fourth paradigm construes liberal education as a preparation for engagement with and action in the world. (Historically, "the world" has meant the public domain, not often the domestic.) The aim is personal effectiveness—and so it idealizes the educated person as one a committed agent, one who can act effectively and ethically to persuade others, to serve and advance worthy causes—to change the world or to labor in that hope. Civic engagement, social reform, political activism, public service, cultural critique—these and more are activities that are anticipated or

often embodied in the educational program. Curricular content devolves from a knowledge and critique of the state of the world in light of one's values, along with the requisite capacities for personal effectiveness.

To become liberally educated is to be liberated from powerlessness, false constraints, and social entropy; from helpless by-standing; to gain freedom of agency, the capacity to shape one's will to the fulfillment of one's best judgment, to take a stand and act on behalf of one's values. This paradigm is exemplified in Isocrates' school, but also in Antioch College and in the motto of "Princeton in the nation's service."

Acquiring the Skills of Learning

This last paradigm emphasizes the "arts" of "liberal arts" (the *artes* of *artes liberalis*; the *technai* of *technai eleutheriai*). Here there is less concern with content, more with acquisition of the transferable skills that are useful in learning anything. An educated person is one who has learned how to learn and who has the disposition to use relevant skills in learning throughout a lifetime. Of course, the relevant skills change with technology, but in today's world we are likely to focus on reading comprehension, quantitative skills, logical reasoning, information literacy, critical thinking, communication and social skills, and related skills.

What motivates this paradigm is the recognition that the world is constantly changing, knowledge evolves, memory fades, and we cannot carry the knowledge from the past confidently into the future. We can, however, respond by equipping ourselves with the skills to learn whatever might be salient to a flourishing life.

Acquisition of these skills holds out the promise of liberation from becoming outmoded, from cognitive entropy, and the ignorance and uselessness that may follow. The student gains the freedom of self-directed learning.

I hope I have conveyed these paradigms as quite distinct, but comprehensive and coherent, visions of liberal education, differing in the skills and virtues they elevate, the locus of the curriculum, their ideals of the educated person, and the form of liberation they offer. Each is attractive, even compelling, but "thin"; they require instantiation, so they each can be a fertile matrix to spawn curricula, to influence pedagogy, even to shape institutions. Many familiar educational controversies arise out of their competition, but conflicts may also arise within a paradigm—for example, disputes over the contents of the canon in the Transmission of Culture paradigm, or disputes about the comparative value of different disciplines in the Understanding the World paradigm. As I said, the tradition of liberal education displays many iterations of theory and practice that reflect their competition, their shifting prominence, and the relationships drawn among them.

But they are not simply competitors. Ultimately, they seek the same end. It is perhaps easy to forget that these paradigms arise from the same supreme purpose: the development of a conception of a flourishing life and the cultivation of such a life. And they are intertwined: a vigorous champion of the assimilation of culture through an agonistic encounter with great texts might conclude (as Oakeshott did) by asserting that such study is the pathway to self-actualization. Similarly, an advocate of the skills of learning model may ultimate justify their position by the need for such skills in engaging the world. Beyond this, however, they seem to require each other: the questions each asks leads to the questions of others. How could one engage with the world without understanding it? How could one assimilate great works without the skills of learning? The distinctive liabilities and dangers that each paradigm carries are ameliorated by the strengths of others. For example, the temptation to self-absorption of the self-actualization paradigm is corrected by the outward and more objective requirements of explicating the texts of others, or of understanding or engaging with the world. The hypnotism of the past that is perhaps a liability of a life devoted to masterworks is countered by the future orientation that undergirds efforts to engage, change, or reform the world. And so on. Most institutions today seem to claim a blend of most if not all these five paradigms; even those that elevate one usually imply that their signature paradigm is a gateway to the benefits of the others.

Finally, I want to claim that this account entails that liberal education is a deeply moral enterprise. First, the process of liberal education must meet ethical criteria, such as avoiding indoctrination and valuing the student's integrity. Second, the supreme aim—a flourishing life—incorporates moral virtues and values. A flourishing life is, however, larger in scope than a moral life; it incorporates more than moral virtues and values. And finally, it is indirectly moral in that success in its subsidiary aims is relevant to, often essential for, moral activity. Expanding the moral imagination, knowing how the world works, seeing the larger picture and broader implications, developing one's capacities and knowing how to learn, and having the skills of worldly engagement—surely these are components of moral education and enlightened moral agency.

An emphasis on objectives and outcomes is meaningful only when our activities remain tethered to our aim. But this brings us to our educational task: each of us—each institution, each academic department, each faculty—carries the responsibility of regularly reinterpreting our vision of liberal education, of continuing the evolution and vitality of the tradition. What is educational quality, what serves the living of a flourishing life *today*? Each paradigm comprehends a plethora of further specification. Our work is to craft a blended version of these paradigms that suits our our intellectual, social, and technological context. This task itself reflects—and may embody—the process of crafting and cultivating a flourishing life.