

— LETTERS
on LIBERTY



THE LIBERATING POWER
OF EDUCATION

Harley Richardson

— LETTERS
on LIBERTY

Welcome to *Letters on Liberty* from the Academy of Ideas. *Letters on Liberty* is a modest attempt to reinvigorate the public sphere and argue for a freer society.

academyofideas.org.uk/letters



Since its foundation in 2000, the Academy of Ideas has hosted thousands of public debates, festivals, forums and salons where people from all walks of life come together to debate often-controversial topics and to challenge contemporary knee-jerk orthodoxies.

We always hold on to one defining principle:
free speech allowed.

academyofideas.org.uk

What are Letters on Liberty?

It's not always easy to defend freedom. Public life may have been locked down recently, but it has been in bad health for some time.

Open debate has been suffocated by today's censorious climate and there is little cultural support for freedom as a foundational value. What we need is rowdy, good-natured disagreement and people prepared to experiment with what freedom might mean today.

We stand on the shoulders of giants, but we shouldn't be complacent. We can't simply rely on the thinkers of the past to work out what liberty means today, and how to argue for it.

Drawing on the tradition of radical pamphlets from the seventeenth century onwards - designed to be argued over in the pub as much as parliament - *Letters on Liberty* promises to make you think twice. Each *Letter* stakes a claim for how to forge a freer society in the here and now.

We hope that, armed with these *Letters*, you take on the challenge of fighting for liberty.

Academy of Ideas team

THE LIBERATING POWER OF EDUCATION

For as long as humans have acquired knowledge about the world we inhabit, and skills with which to manipulate aspects of that world to our advantage, we have understood the importance of passing these insights on to future generations. Over time, this knowledge has accumulated and become refined and specialised. We stand upon the shoulders of giants.

As communities throughout history began to harness this knowledge to develop sophisticated civilisations, life, for some at least, became about more than mere survival. People found themselves for the first time with the luxury of having choices about how to spend their time. In fourth-century BC Athens, this prompted philosophers to pose the question: what should a person learn when they have free time on their hands? Aristotle's answer was the 'liberal arts' - the study of the open-ended fields of philosophy, literature and the nascent sciences. The liberal arts were believed to cultivate adults who could both participate as citizens in democratic society and partake in what Aristotle saw as the highest form of human activity - intellectual reflection. He distinguished the liberal arts from the 'mechanical arts' taught to slaves (such as bakery, farming, hunting,

navigation and medicine), which were considered to be narrow and repetitive and were taught to those expected to play a particular role in society.

Why do we try to direct education to narrow ends, whether that be teaching to the test or directing funding to subjects perceived to be good for the economy?

For Athenians, becoming versed in the liberal arts was only possible if you were a free, male citizen; it was not an option for the women or slaves whose labour made that freedom possible. There was certainly no belief that the liberal arts should be available to everyone. As far as Aristotle and his peers were concerned, slavery was nature's way.

If tools could operate themselves, Aristotle reasoned in *Politics*; there would be no need for slaves, all could be free and all could have a liberal education. But for him, this was just a thought experiment, a fantasy, because the existence of slaves must have been according to the gods' design. The same applied to the role of women, whose role in life was thought to be domestic. Much like the modern mantra of 'stay in your lane', this hierarchy was allotted by nature and deemed unchangeable.

Nevertheless, it's remarkable to consider that the principle of open-ended learning was established so early in the history of education. A trace of this intimate association of education with freedom survives to this day in the word 'school', which was derived from the ancient Greek *schole*, meaning leisure. History also shows us that freedom, once achieved, is not to be taken for granted. As Frank Furedi argued in his *Letter on Liberty, Freedom is No Illusion*,ⁱⁱ the case for freedom must be made again and again.

Almost 2,500 years after Aristotle, we have more material and social freedom than the Greeks could have dreamed of. Why then is society still uncomfortable with the idea of an open-ended liberal education for all? Why do we try to direct education to narrow ends, whether that be teaching to the test or directing funding to subjects perceived to be good for the economy?

Education is frightening

Perhaps the ambivalence about the pursuit of a liberal education stems from the realisation that once we teach someone something, they may put that knowledge to ends we had not anticipated - and may not approve of.

This thought was uppermost in the minds of early Christian teachers, who laid the foundations for our modern education system. Education in the medieval Christian world was strictly vocational, with students learning to read and write in order to become members of the clergy. The medium of education was Latin, the language of scripture which was believed to contain all important knowledge. But learning Latin also gave students access to dangerous and seductive pagan materials, which risked leading them to question the tenets of Christian faith. Even Saint Jerome, who had been responsible for the translation of the Bible from Greek to Latin, was said to have been castigated by God in a dream for his love of classical literature: 'You are not a Christian, but a Ciceronian.'ⁱⁱⁱ

Knowledge, unlike today, was not conceived of as simply a collection of inert facts - it had to be internalised, articulated and discussed.

Education was both necessary to spread the word of God, and dangerous for the ideas it might bring to light. In response, Christian leaders placed strict bounds on formal education, constraining not only the content, but also who could teach or be taught. By the end of the Middle Ages, there were at most a few hundred grammar schools in England. A licence from

a bishop was required to open a grammar school right up until the nineteenth century. The poor were fined for sending their children to school and formal education for most of the population was all but non-existent.

Despite these restrictions on the scope of education, the compelling nature of 'illicit' knowledge meant it was hard to suppress in the long run. The important Christian thinker Saint Augustine of Hippo recognised the intellectual value of the pagan classics of Ancient Rome and convinced sceptical church leaders that they could provide a useful basis for understanding scripture.^{iv} This process would be repeated during the twelfth-century Renaissance, when the Greek classics were rediscovered. Ideas of rational enquiry from thinkers like Aristotle were first suppressed for encouraging heresy, then tentatively accepted, and eventually synthesised with mainstream Christian thought.

From the early ninth century, this living, evolving quality of knowledge acquired formal expression in the Seven Liberal Arts - a schema that would provide the basis of the medieval curriculum across Europe for over 500 years. At the heart of the Seven Liberal Arts was a dynamic tension between the first three, known collectively as the Trivium: Grammar (knowledge), Rhetoric (communication) and Dialectic

(debate). Knowledge, unlike today, was not conceived of as simply a collection of inert facts - it had to be internalised, articulated and discussed in collaboration with others in order to develop an understanding of it.

This collective, ongoing process had truth as its endpoint - of course the 'truth' that medieval educators had in mind was an understanding of God and of God's universe. The Trivium formed the basis for students to study the other four Arts: the Quadrivium of Arithmetic, Geometry, Astronomy and Music. (The Quadrivium, in essence, was the different aspects of mathematics and science as conceived at that time.) These rational religious enquiries into the nature of the universe and humanity set in process a chain of philosophical and scientific discoveries that would culminate in the Enlightenment period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The right amount of education

Concerns about the religious ignorance and moral laxity associated with poverty became a growing concern as the population grew in the post-Tudor era. Local philanthropists and church leaders began to set up charity schools to teach poor children the Three R's (reading, writing and arithmetic) as well as the

Catholic catechism to ensure that they became pious and respectful members of society. Over the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, over 18,000 charity day and Sunday schools were established, providing the basis of what would later become the state education system.^v

There was no aspiration for what we would today call social mobility - on the contrary, the aim was to teach children to appreciate their fixed place in society and no more. As Sunday-school founder Sarah Trimmer made clear:

It is not intended that the children of the poor should be instructed in the branches of a liberal education, but merely in English to enable them to read the Gospels.^{vi}

Even this went too far for some. The philosopher Bernard Mandeville's belief that poverty was the only way to ensure an adequate supply of labour was typical of the time:

The more a shepherd and ploughman know of the world, the less fitted he'll be to go through the fatigue and hardship of it with cheerfulness and equanimity.^{vii}

Attempts were made to redirect education for the poor to more immediate, practical ends. Boys and girls were taught practical skills in workhouse schools to

sell the fruits of their labour, but this scheme backfired as there was little call for the output of these schools. The demand from artisans and tradespeople was mainly for boys who could read and write in order to help with bookkeeping and commerce. The pupils who had been taught the 'Three R's' at the 'traditional' charity schools were the ones with the skills required for the labour market. And so, these schools, in spite of their steadfastly narrow aims, did provide some pauper children with the skills to break into professions which had previously been the domains of the middle classes.

Pioneering heads such as Frances Mary Buss demonstrated that girls were just as rational and capable of dealing with liberal subjects as boys, allowing young women to pursue professions which had hitherto been unthinkable.

Teaching large numbers of children the Three R's had another unanticipated effect. In the early nineteenth century, many charity-school girls went on to become servants of the middle and upper classes. Working in the houses of wealthier people, these girls often found themselves with an educational advantage over the young ladies they served, whose education had usually been restricted to domestic matters. This embarrassing

situation could not be allowed to stand, prompting a middle-class clamour for governesses to educate their daughters and a demand for schools and colleges to educate a new generation of governesses.

As a result, schools began offering a remarkably liberal education in contrast to ‘the usual accomplishments’ that were expected of girls. This was all taking place at a time when it was still thought that women were so fragile that education could literally harm their health. Pioneering heads such as Frances Mary Buss demonstrated that girls were just as rational and capable of dealing with liberal subjects as boys, allowing young women to pursue professions which had hitherto been unthinkable.^{viii}

The freedom to educate ourselves

The early nineteenth century ushered in the era of the ‘classical liberal education’, featured in public schools like Rugby. These emerging schools synthesised the humanist insights of the ancient classics with new knowledge of the Enlightenment. The essence of what was taught was distilled by school inspector and poet Matthew Arnold’s phrase: ‘The best that has been thought and known.’^{ix} These schools were attended solely by the children of the elites. But outside their

grounds, working people also began to partake in the pursuit of ‘the best that has been thought and known’.

Working people considered it their right, as rational human beings, to have access to the ideas and knowledge that had previously been the preserve of the upper classes.

Recall how in Ancient Greece, Aristotle believed that tools that could operate themselves would create the leisure time required for all citizens to benefit from a liberal education. Jump forward 2,000 years to the Industrial Revolution, and Aristotle’s fantasy had become at least partial reality; the invention of large-scale mechanisation meant that tools really did operate themselves. This revolution was itself a result of centuries of scientific progress in which education, despite its historically limited scope, had played a propulsive role. What had once been understood as a natural limit on human activity turned out to be a mere transitory barrier.

With many working people now finding a measure of free time on their hands, the Three R’s taught in charity schools (in particular reading) provided the basis for a self-taught liberal education. These autodidacts (from the Greek *autos* ‘self’ and *didaskhein*

‘teach’) read alone and together, setting up discussion groups, evening classes and even schools to create their own informal version of the Trivium. *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* by Jonathan Rose^x documents hundreds of examples of autodidacticism in action. Working people debated the morally complex stories and internal contradictions of the Bible, and enthusiastically devoured the great works of the Western canon. They considered it their right, as rational human beings, to have access to the ideas and knowledge that had previously been the preserve of the upper classes.

The modern involvement of the state in education was prompted, at least in part, by a fear of what people would learn if left to their own devices.

This enthusiasm for reading also helped foster a collective sense that political and social change was possible. With printing presses by this time widely available, autodidacts read huge numbers of newspapers, political books and pamphlets. Many working-class people became politically active in movements like the Chartists, at the same time as ideas around socialism and communism were gripping the imaginations of people across Europe.

This boom in access to ideas provoked another expression of fear about where uncontrolled education and knowledge might lead. An 1839 pamphlet written by Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth, the first secretary of education, explained ‘the intentions of HM Government’:

We confess that we cannot contemplate with unconcern the vast physical force which is now moved by men so ignorant and so unprincipled as the Chartist leaders... If [the working classes] are to have knowledge, surely it is the part of a wise and virtuous government to do all in its power to secure them useful knowledge and to guard them against pernicious opinions... By experience and education only can the workmen be induced to leave undisturbed the controls of commercial enterprises in the hands of the capitalists.^{xi}

The modern involvement of the state in education was prompted, at least in part, by a fear of what people would learn if left to their own devices.

The challenge today

I began this *Letter* by describing the ancient distinction between the mechanical and liberal arts. It is tempting to map that onto modern arguments about practical

versus academic education, but that would be a mistake. For a start, the mechanical arts included activities such as drama that modern minds would classify as open-ended and liberal. Today, many practical ‘mechanical’ crafts provide people with what American author Matthew Crawford describes as ‘the intellectual satisfaction of hand work’,^{xiii} but are also liberal in the sense that they can be put to uses which are only limited by the imagination.

The distinction that matters today is not between the academic and the practical, but between positive and negative views of humanity.

The creation of the modern mass-education system was not an inevitable by-product of material progress (important as that was). It was tightly bound up with the social and political struggles of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, in which ordinary men and women fought to be taken seriously as rational beings - equal, in moral if not economic terms, to their supposed ‘betters’. This drew upon the Enlightenment idea, articulated by eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant, that human beings are united by a common rationality.^{xiii} And so, we are all capable of being educated in ‘the best that has been thought and known’.

For working-class children, this meant not just

free schooling for all, but access to a broad curriculum with the potential to reach beyond their allotted place in life.

Teaching is an act of faith - the unexpected is central to education. We teach, but we cannot know what our students will do with the knowledge and skills we pass on to them.

But this positive view of humanity and its potential has been under attack for some time. The recent Adam Curtis documentary series *Can't Get You Out of My Head*^{civ} revealed how a pseudo-scientific view of humans as irrational and driven by subconscious desires has become increasingly influential over the past half-century. This diminished view of humanity cannot fail to influence what we expect from education.

The extent to which our education system could be called liberal at any given point during the past 100 years or so is debatable - and beyond the scope of this short *Letter*. But it is undeniable that many elements of schooling and the experience of a university education do liberate and widen opportunities for people. Teachers instinctively recognise this - it is part of the appeal of becoming an educator.

Yet this instinct always co-exists with a powerful desire to shape education around what we perceive to be society's immediate needs. This is expressed in many ways: by politicians reorienting universities towards practical rather than academic subjects, by business leaders demanding that schools teach skills for the workplace or indeed by teachers wanting schools to promote political positions on issues such as climate change. In different ways, these all treat students as what Kant called 'means to an end',^{xv} not ends in themselves.

Such thinking is also counterproductive on its own terms. This contradiction can be seen mostly clearly in the debate about how to foster creativity, which is thought to be the key to solving society's problems. Creativity has been recast as a generic or abstract teachable skill that need not be encumbered by specific knowledge. Yet this narrow outlook has undermined the very condition that makes creativity possible - a broad knowledge of the world, as provided by a liberal education. We are unlikely to make inspired, unexpected connections if we have little knowledge to connect.

Teaching is an act of faith - the unexpected is central to education. We teach, but we cannot know what our students will do with the knowledge and skills we pass

on to them. That is why we should teach ‘the best that has been thought and known’, rather than whatever we think is important in the short-term.

This act of faith is coloured by our view of humanity. If we see people in a dim light, we are likely to be frightened by the liberating power of education and to try to suppress or control it. If, on the other hand, we take a more positive view of humanity’s potential, we will embrace this risky appeal of a liberal education and look forward to finding out where it leads us.

References

- ⁱ Aristotle, *Politics: Book Eight*, Oxford University Press, 1995
- ⁱⁱ Furedi, Frank, *Freedom is No Illusion, Letters on Liberty*, December 2021
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ferguson, Everett, McHugh, Michael P, W Norris, Frederick (editors), *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, Taylor & Francis, 1998
- ^{iv} West, Andrew Fleming, *Alcuin and the Rise of the Christian Schools*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1912
- ^v Curtis, SJ, *History of Education in Great Britain*, University Tutorial Press Ltd, 1963

- vi Kendall, Guy, *Robert Raikes: a critical study*, Nicholas and Watson Limited, 1939
- vii Jones, MG, *The Charity School Movement: a study of 18th century puritanism in action*, Cambridge University Press, 1938
- viii Watson, Nigel, *And Their Works Do Follow Them: the story of North London Collegiate School 1850-2000*, James & James Ltd, 2000
- ix Arnold, Matthew, *Culture and Anarchy*, Oxford University Press, 1869
- x Rose, Jonathan, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, Yale University Press, 2010
- xi Adamson, John William, *English Education 1789-1902*, Cambridge University Press, 1964
- xii Goodhart, David, *Head Hand Heart: the struggle for dignity and status in the 21st century*, Allen Lane, 2020
- xiii Kant, Immanuel, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Cambridge University Press, 2012
- xiv Curtis, Adam, *Can't Get You Out of My Head*, BBC, February 2021
- xv Kant, Immanuel, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Cambridge University Press, 2012

Author

Harley Richardson has worked in education publishing for over 20 years and is an organiser of the Academy of Ideas Education Forum. He writes and lectures on learning through the ages and blogs at historyofeducation.net. He has written about pre-state education from Ancient Greece to the Industrial Revolution for the *Routledge History of Education* (forthcoming).



Illustrations

Jan Bowman is an artist and author of *This is Birmingham*. See her work at janbow.com

Letters on Liberty identity

Alex Dale

Pamphlet and website design

Martyn Perks

— LETTERS on LIBERTY

academyofideas.org.uk/letters



ISBN 978-1-9196001-5-4



9 781919 600154 >