

The Purpose of General Education

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1. Introduction

I would like to begin by talking about General Education in America. General Education plays a very particular and interesting role in American Higher Education. A typical undergraduate at one of our colleges or universities is expected to satisfy a range of requirements in his or her major area of study (mathematics, economics, philosophy, etc.); and they will also take a range of electives – courses that are not required for graduation but in which the student might want to explore a developing interest. In addition to both of these, however, most undergraduate institutions (though not all) require that students satisfy a range of general education requirements as well. These are the requirements that must be satisfied for the student to count – in the opinion of the institution – as *generally educated*. They are the requirements, in other words, that every student must fulfill regardless of their areas of interest or specialty in order to be prepared to enter the broader world and to aspire to live a good life in it.

As you can imagine, there is quite a lot of debate about what these general education requirements should be. At Harvard University, where I teach, we have just completed a grand overhaul of our general education requirements. The exercise turns out to be rather a philosophical one, since one's views about how one ought to be generally educated will depend closely on one's views about what success in a life requires, what the prerequisites for such success may be, and what role the college or university program has in so preparing its graduates. I would like to reflect a little bit on these general issues, and my reflections will be organized by some of the experiences we've had at Harvard. I don't know, but I am eager to hear from you, whether these problems and issues sound relevant for the academic and cultural world in which you find yourselves here in China.

I will begin with a simple question, which is the question whether colleges or universities should be in the business of preparing their students for life. Aristotle famously said, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, that although he intended to talk about the general question what a good life consists in, he didn't intend to be teaching his students how to live one. Indeed, he said, if you are not already well brought up in the cultural traditions by your parents, and therefore already understand as a kind of second nature what you ought to be aiming for in a life, then there is nothing he could do to help you out. Certainly studying the *Nicomachean Ethics* was not going to teach you to live well.

When I gave a version of this talk in Norway recently they told me that there was there a great national debate going on there about general education at the schools and

universities. But the debate was not about what such a general education program should consist in, as it typically is in America. Instead, the debate was about *whether* there should be such a program at all. I suppose that Aristotle would have argued that there should not. But the fact that philosophical reflection on the principles of the good life does not prepare one to live well, as Aristotle believed, doesn't mean that education in general is irrelevant for the good life. Indeed, although I agree with Aristotle that a knowledge of philosophical ethics is not a prerequisite to living well, I nevertheless think that if one is lucky enough to live in a society with a rich cultural heritage, then learning to embody the precepts of that tradition – in a way that allows for the creative application of them – can be invaluable in giving direction and meaning to one's life. This is an idea that I will follow up on in a moment.

Before that, though, I must address the question whether the school or university is the right place for these things to be taught. One of the reasons there is still a strong emphasis on general education in the United States is the presence of the long-standing doctrine of *in loco parentis*. This is the doctrine, derived from English Common Law, which allows colleges and schools to act in the best interests of the students. Effectively, the educational institution has the right to take the place of the parent – literally, *in loco parentis* - in situations in which the best interests of the student are at stake while under the care of that institution. Strictly speaking this doctrine simply gives the school or college the *right* to act in the best interests of the student – to discipline him or her, for example, in order to bring about better behavior. But it is also sometimes understood to incur a *responsibility* on the school or college to offer an education that brings the student out at his or her best. It is in this context that the impulse to general education often takes place in America.

One thing a school might be doing in generally educating the student is teaching him or her appropriate patterns of responsible civic behavior. Some of this kind of education has typically occurred in America during the elementary and middle school years when students are taught about their rights and responsibilities as citizens of the state. But this is not usually what is meant by general education at the college level. In fact, as I have mentioned already, there is not really very much agreement at all anymore about what general education at the college level should be. But I've mentioned already that I think it should be about giving the student the tools for experiencing his or her life as meaningful and worthwhile. One model for this can be found in the educational experience of someone close to me. Let me tell about the extraordinary education my wife's grandmother received, and why I think it might be a model for general education today.

My wife's grandmother is from the Lin family, and she grew up in the Fujian Province of China in the early part of the 20th century. She came from a long line of scholars, and as was traditional at the time her mother took over the responsibility for her education. This was a very rigorous classical education that was based on learning by heart a huge corpus of Classical Chinese literature and philosophy. From a very young age her mother required her to memorize hundreds of lines of poetry and literature per day. Naturally, this was a difficult task, and as a young child grandmother sometimes bristled at it.

Eventually she came to ask her mother why she was required to do all this hard work. Her mother told her something very interesting. She said, “Lin, these poems and stories may not mean anything to you right now. But it is important that you memorize them and they become part of you. For some day in the future some event will occur, and a line of poetry will leap unbidden into your mind. And in that moment you will understand the event in terms of the line of poetry, and you will understand the poem in terms of the event, and life will become meaningful for you that way.”

I have always found this an incredibly moving story, and one that helps me to understand at least one of the things that a general education could do for us. In particular, it could help us understand not just what is right and wrong, but what is *meaningful*. It can help us to see the events of our everyday lives in terms of a greater cultural inheritance that will make us feel connected to our history and invested in our future. It need not do this by making us accept our cultural inheritance. It might, for instance, show us a deep inhumanity that it harbors and bring about in us the desire to change that cultural inheritance. Or it might highlight for us as meaningful and worthwhile some aspect of a situation at hand that otherwise would have passed by unnoticed. But in either case it would allow us to experience the events of our lives as demanding either our respect or our sense of wonder or our condemnation. It would guarantee that we experience those events in terms of the meaning they have, rather than as a meaningless series of indistinct occurrences. An education like this, in other words, has the chance of making life meaningful and worthwhile. So when Lin first told me this story I was eager to hear from her whether it had worked out for her the way her mother said it would. With great anticipation I asked her the question. “Grandma,” I said, “was it really true? Did all those lines of poetry really invest your life with meaning?”

She thought about it for a while.

Finally she said, simply, “No.”

I was devastated. I wondered whether I had misheard. So I pressed again. “Are you sure?” I said.

And she thought a bit more.

And after a long silence she finally said, “Some of the lines have never popped up.”

In the United States, one of the issues that our writers and artists are concerned about is the threat of nihilism. Nihilism is the state a culture reaches when most of its inhabitants fail to be able to recognize distinctions of meaning and worth in a situation or a life. There is a lot of talk in America about this state, and a lot of concern about how to avoid it. But for someone with an education like my wife’s grandmother, the threat of nihilism is completely moot. Her cultural inheritance, embodied through years of diligent exercise and study, guarantees that the events in her life are filled with a sense of meaning and worth. Some of those thousands of lines of poetry have never yet popped into her mind – that is true. But after all, there is still time.

2. Philosophy and General Education

There are several things I would like to emphasize about this notion of general education. The first is that it should be open to everyone. Everyone recognizes that there is no point to having lots of money or lots of power or lots of physical pleasures simply for their own sake. These are not the things that make life meaningful and worthwhile. It is no contradiction in terms, after all, to imagine a very rich person or a very powerful person or a person who achieves all the physical pleasures in the world, who nevertheless experiences his life as devoid of meaning and worth. That is not to say that money and power and physical pleasures are irrelevant in making life worth living. But they are certainly not sufficient on their own. So whether you are studying mathematics or business or philosophy or medicine, or whether you have simply devoted yourself to the physical pleasures of life, you have a right to hope that the life and career you pursue in these areas is in addition one that you experience as meaningful and worthwhile. This is the sense in which a general education ought to be the right of every student no matter what discipline he or she is in.

A second point is that, it seems to me, there are lots of different – and equally good – cultural inheritances. A former advisor of mine, who is not so much younger than my wife’s grandmother, grew up in the American Midwest memorizing the plays and poetry of Shakespeare. How I envy the way that he – completely without effort – experiences the events in his life in terms of these extraordinary lines of poetry. Here is an example. Recently I mentioned to him a book I was reading about the assassination of Abraham Lincoln by John Wilkes Booth - a famous event in the history of the United States. The book is eloquently entitled My Thoughts be Bloody. I knew it must be a reference to something, but the moment I mentioned it to my advisor he completed the phrase from Hamlet: “My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth.” That is what Hamlet says in a famous soliloquy as he plots his revenge against his uncle Claudius. In an instant – and completely unbidden – he experienced the story of Lincoln’s assassination by Booth in the context of a family drama like that of Hamlet – one that pitted one generation against the next, that was motivated by a desire for revenge and that ended in death and tragedy. As it happens, this is a drama that in fact reflected Booth’s own peculiar feud with his father and brother, both well-known actors who were famous for their portrayals of Hamlet in Shakespeare’s play. The ability to experience these connections immediately and without effort, to see the world as directly giving forth meanings and distinctions of worth, is a great gift. And it is impossible to say that this set of cultural meanings is more or less worthwhile than the meanings my wife’s grandmother experiences when she sees the world in terms of the writings of Confucius or Mencius or some other great figure of the tradition of her youth.

Indeed, much more important than which tradition one grows up in, is putting in the effort to learn by heart the great works of that tradition. For there is no substitute for putting these works into one’s entire being. We face a particular threat to this practice in the technological age. For now that we have an almost infinite amount of information at our fingertips, there is little incentive to learn anything by heart. But if we satisfy ourselves with the practice of looking things up on the internet, then we will never have

the happy experience of being surprised by the meaning in a situation. A situation becomes meaningful not because one searches to find the meaning in it, but because one is struck by its meaning, and struck in a way that one can at least partly articulate. This can happen only if you have embodied the wisdom of a culture in such a way that it can speak through you, it can appear unbidden to enliven your understanding of the situation. When one embodies the wisdom of a culture in this way, the threat of nihilism will easily be kept at bay.

Finally, learning the traditions of a culture is not learning the principles for how to live – it is much more interesting and wonderful than that. Plato thought, following Socrates, that one could not live a good life unless one was clear about the principles on the basis of which a life counted as being a good one. As a result, he thought education should ultimately be directed toward the philosophical study of the universal principles underlying the nature of the Good. On his view these principles are hard to see because the non-rational parts of our soul get in the way of our focusing on them directly. So education should ultimately be – for those properly constructed – about learning to reason carefully and clearly. The point is not just that learning to reason carefully and clearly is a good thing, or that you'll be able to pass some kind of exam more easily if you know how to do it. The point is that learning to reason carefully and clearly is the essence of what it is to be a human being, and so to live the best life possible for us we must be able to master this ability.

This is not at all I am recommending. The greatest works of art and literature and philosophy in a culture are not those that list didactically the principles for living, or even those that allow us clearly and rationally to deduce such principles. Rather, the greatest and most important works of a culture are the ones that describe the world, and our place in it, in a way that consistently surprises and awes us, in a way that highlights what is valuable in it and what is worth preserving from it. And embodying these great works is nothing like learning the rules for living. It is, instead, learning a way to see what is meaningful and worthwhile in a life. And that, I believe, is what a general education could be for at its best.

Someday, I hope to achieve it myself.