

The Identity of Education

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Something seems wanting in America to incite and stimulate Youth to Study. In Europe the Encouragements to Learning are of themselves much greater than can be given here. Whoever distinguishes himself there, in either of the three learned Professions, gains Fame, and often Wealth and Power: A poor Man's Son has a Chance, if he studies hard, to rise, either in the Law or the Church, to gainful Offices or Benefices; ... to have a Voice in Parliament, ...; as a Statesman or first Minister to govern Nations, and even to mix his Blood with Princes.¹

Well, I bet this isn't the first time that the graduating class of the School of Education at Ben Franklin's University, has been regaled with words from Franklin's 1749 *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pensilvania*. But I am hoping that it *is* the first time on this august occasion that the speaker has chosen to draw your attention to footnote 3. (The way I see it, footnotes—for professors—are ketchup on the fries of the mind.)

Franklin's observation shows, I think, how far we've come. The American educational system is no longer the poor cousin of her European counterparts. The world now looks to this country for leadership in the sciences, natural and social, and the humanities. More than this, the worldly rewards of learning in our country are greater than ever before. A college degree is the essential first step in entering the learned professions—of which there are now many more than three; most of our congressmen and women and Senators have college degrees; and, for those of you with an ambition to mix your blood with princes, well, I suspect a graduate degree from the University of Pennsylvania will be the essential first step on the road. (Though, come to think of it, that great Philadelphian Grace Kelly managed to snag Prince Rainier of Monaco without bothering to stop off at Penn.)

Today, Franklin might also be pleased to note, the scholar's domain is a vast area of the American economy and American national life. There are scores of cities, like Philadelphia, where educational institutions are collectively or individually the biggest businesses in town; every year hundreds of thousands of people matriculate at American colleges. The politicians, who in this as in so many things are only following the public, may often seem to value scholars and writers largely as the source of commercial value: the patents of our biologists and chemists and physicists and computer scientists, the copyrights of our novels, which can be transmuted into the scripts of our movie industry. They may seem to value universities as places where people are prepared not for life but for a profession: and seem not to understand that education can prepare us for more than the hours in which we earn our keep. But still, this country sustains the richest system of tertiary education in the world. Where, as a society, we sometimes falter is, of course, in our support for schooling K through 12—the schooling we rely upon to create citizens, not merely scholars.

There is no democratic society, we should acknowledge, that does not take education—the French term *formation* is the argument in a word—with utmost seriousness. Among developed countries, anyway, a program of universal education

has indeed become universal. Every liberal democracy has also thought it right to inculcate its fundamental values, including equality. Indeed, education isn't just a means of teaching about equality; it is a means of helping to promote equality. A decade after Franklin wrote the remarks I began with, he became convinced of the evil of slavery, and set about opening a number of free schools for the education of blacks. Education, he had long hoped, might be a means of creating a populace less fettered by ancient hierarchies and prejudices than that of the Old World. For Franklin, as for us, education was a means both to foster the autonomy of the child—the capacities to make his way in the world—and to promote the welfare of the polity.

But pupils are children, and children come from families: the slate of history is never rubbed clean. And where these two educational objectives—the welfare of the child and the needs of the society—can seem inharmonious is where collective identities are at stake. It's clear that some parents view public education as a threatening and disruptive force in their lives. If you want your children to hew to the luminous path of a truth already wholly known, then pedagogy that encourages children to think for themselves and question accepted opinion is unlikely to put you at your ease. You will think not about the construction of character but about its corruption.

Here's an eloquent précis of how personal identity might relate to schooling, courtesy of the eminent liberal theorist Bruce Ackerman: "The entire educational system will, if you like, resemble a great sphere," he says. "Children land upon the sphere at different points, depending on their primary culture; the task is to help them explore the globe in a way that permits them to glimpse the deeper meanings of the dramas passing on around them. At the end of the journey, however, the now mature citizen has every right to locate himself at the very point from which he began—just as he may also strike out to discover an unoccupied portion of the sphere."²

And here's an equally eloquent précis, to this point, from the eminent conservative theorist Michael Oakeshott: "Each of us is born in a corner of the earth and at a particular moment in historic time, lapped round with locality. But school and university are places apart where a declared learner is emancipated from the limitations of his local circumstances and from the wants he may happen to have acquired, and is moved by intimations of what he has never yet dreamed... They are, then, sheltered places where excellence may be heard because the din of local partialities is no more than a distant rumble."³

For all the political distance between the two authors, theirs is essentially the same vision. They share a hope that education might, as we say, "expand our horizons," that it should expose us to a broader world than the one we already inhabit. And, of course, these accounts emphasize the benefits to the children, who may gain deeper understanding of the "dramas passing on around them," who may be "emancipated from the limitations of ... local circumstances." Both sound pluralist, humane, open-hearted: and, for some citizens, this is just the problem. If you think you dwell in the City upon a Hill, you may not be pleased to see it reduced to a mere point on "a great sphere"; nor will the promise to reduce "local partialities" to a "distant rumble" necessarily please those whose partialities they are.

These aren't concerns we can dismiss outright. Don't parents have rights, in respect to the shaping of their children's identities, that are a necessary corollary of parental obligations? Indeed, aren't families bound to try to induct their children into the

mores, identities, and traditions that the adult members of the family take as their own?

And so the role that education does and should play in the creation of citizens has long been controversial. These days, public schools proceed in a gingerly manner when issues of identity are at stake. But what we can't retreat to is some contentless, empyrean realm that is, so to speak, identity-neutral. Even aside from the usual hot-button issues—evolution, say, or gay rights—identity issues have a way of coming to the fore. This is true even among those battles that don't frontally involve identity. There are questions, for example, about what weight to place on various topics. How much American history should children in America know? Within that history, should the focus be on individuals or on social processes; on America's failures or her successes? In recent years, some critics have objected to a history curriculum that has too much of Harriet Tubman and not enough of Thomas Jefferson; and they have also objected to curriculum whose discussion of Thomas Jefferson focuses too much on his betrayal of liberty—in his persistent failure to emancipate his slaves—and not enough on his place as the author of the Declaration of Independence, as liberty's champion. No doubt a focus too lopsided shades off into simple untruth: but the real debates here are not about what happened but about what narratives we will embed them in; they are about which of the many true stories we will tell.

From the point of view of democratic politics, we can agree, we need to prepare children with the truth and the capacity to acquire more of it. Because—like us, but more so—they cannot absorb the whole truth, in all its complexity, all at once, we must begin with simplified stories; sometimes, even, with what is literally untrue. The obvious model where untruth prepares the way for truth is physics: the easiest way, we think, to prepare children for Einstein and Schrödinger is to teach them Newton and Maxwell first. But Newton and Maxwell did not know about relativity or about the indeterminacy of the fundamental physical laws, and so their physics, which assumes absolute space and deterministic laws is just not true. And the teaching of history is full of cases where we can delve deeper as we grow older into stories we first heard, in simplified versions, in first grade. Because it is on the way to the truth, or because it is the closest thing to the truth that, at a certain age, they can understand, such misinformation (and misinformation is what it is, strictly speaking) can be seen as aimed at helping children develop toward an autonomy rooted in the best available understanding of the world.

Yet when we speak of the ideal of autonomy, a question persists. To what extent is autonomy abetted by social identities, to what extent is it constrained by our social identities? As I say, a good deal of effort has gone into making sure that our schools are, in general, tolerant of different identities, whether ethnic, racial, or religious; respecting these identities that largely derive from family. And surely this has been a salutary trend. But here, too, there can be errors of excess. For collective identities have a tendency to "go imperial," so to speak, dominating not only people of other identities, but the other identities, whose shape is exactly what makes each of us what we individually and distinctively are.

In policing this imperialism of identity—an imperialism as visible in racial identities as anywhere else—it is crucial to remember always that we are not simply black or white or yellow or brown, gay or straight or bisexual, Jewish, Christian, Moslem, Buddhist, Confucian: but that we are also brothers and sisters; parents and children;

liberals, conservatives and leftists; teachers and professors and auto-makers and gardeners; fans of the Phillies and the Bruins; amateurs of speed metal and lovers of Wagner; movie-buffs; mystery-readers; surfers and singers; poets and pet-lovers; students and teachers; friends and lovers. Racial identity, say, can be the basis of resistance to racism; but even as we struggle against racism, let us not let our racial identities subject us to new tyrannies.

And the same goes even for our national identity. Among the challenges for our schools as well as our universities is to find a way to balance our American-ness and our obligations to the society that so generously sustains us, on the one hand, with the cosmopolitan needs of the life of the spirit, on the other. We are learning how to live in a world of ideas that is not simply American but also global and thus, in a certain way, the shared space of all of humankind.

One of my favorite proverbs in my father's language is a piece of word-play that runs like this: *Esono esono ena esono sosono*. It means, literally, that there is a difference between an elephant (*esono*) and a worm (*sosono*). But we use it to say that even an elephant and a worm—two creatures as unlike each other as you could imagine—have something in common: their names sound almost the same. So here's a formula for difference—"esono John esono Mary" is how you say that John and Mary are different; or, more relevantly, "esono Ackerman esono Oakeshott"—and this very formula for difference is itself in this strange way alike these very different creatures. It is language that brings worm, elephant and difference together. Even if you are an elephant and I am a worm, your difference can be a resource for me, just as mine can be for you: and if our differences are to be resources for each other, then they must be available for our common human conversation. I suspect that this idea would not have been foreign to Benjamin Franklin. Who was more cosmopolitan than he was? This was you'll recall, a man who traversed the Atlantic eight times, spending time in Ireland, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, and even an island off the coast of Morocco, not to mention his ambassadorial years in France. This was a man who recognized the humanity of Africans and native Americans when others saw merely a labor force to be enslaved, an enemy to be exterminated: a man who never lost sight of the value of education because he never ceased educating himself.

And neither should you. You are going out into the world as educators and scholars of education, advancing the ongoing conversation with the civilizations of the past and of the present; a cosmopolitan conversation whose aim is not to mold others in your own image but to share your best understanding with them, so that you and they can enrich one other.

In doing so, you'll be upholding a grand tradition. One of the things that may strike you, rereading Benjamin Franklin's 1749 *Proposals*, is the emphasis Franklin places on the *social* value of education, not merely the personal advantages it can confer. Here's how his *Proposals* end: "The Idea of what is true Merit, should also be often presented to Youth, explain'd and impress'd on their Minds, as consisting in an Inclination join'd with an Ability to serve Mankind, one's Country, Friends and Family; which Ability is (with the Blessing of God) to be acquir'd or greatly encreas'd by true Learning; and should indeed be the great Aim and End of all Learning."⁴ Surely, it cannot be the exhaustive aim: I, for one, certainly believe in knowledge for its own sake, and I expect many of you would concur. And yet his conception of true Merit has much to be said for it. Those we serve: family, friends, country, yes—but

also, and in the first instance, mankind in general. We land upon the sphere at different points, but the sphere is small. Education not only fosters conversation, but, as Franklin knew, it is itself a form of conversation. And the human conversation, though it has its lulls and silences, never truly comes to an end.

¹ Ben Franklin, *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pensilvania* (Philadelphia, 1749) available at:
<http://www.archives.upenn.edu/primdocs/1749proposals.html>

²Bruce Ackerman, *Social Justice in the Liberal State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 159.

³Michael Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning : Michael Oakeshott on Education*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 24

⁴Franklin, op. cit.