I. On Purpose: Liberal Education and the Question of Value

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Introduction

This chapter explores the dynamics between the purpose and the value of liberal education, drawing on the basic Aristotelian insight that one cannot know whether something is valuable or good without first understanding its fundamental purpose.

By focusing on liberal education, I do wish to constrain the scope of my argument. The varieties of post-secondary degree-granting programs offered both nationally and globally are vast; there may be interesting and important things to say about the purpose and value of them across the whole spectrum, but that is not the task of this chapter. Rather, my case pertains to the domain typically imagined in the United States when one talks about college: post-secondary undergraduate degrees that ascribe to principles and practices of liberal education, which in their most basic form include courses of study that require breadth, depth, and integration of learning across a spectrum of disciplines.

On the Question of Value

In this chapter, I wrestle with a question that our nation and the media are tussling over with a frequency that borders on mania: What is the value of a liberal education?

“The Tuition Is Too Damn High”
“Is College Still Worth It?”
“How the College Bubble Will Pop”
These headlines—from the *Washington Post, Los Angeles Times*, and *Wall Street Journal*, respectively—are part of a powerful media narrative that both reflects and feeds a growing public concern about the cost, the value, even the necessity of a college degree, or at least those degrees that we would count within the domain of liberal education. It is a narrative that argues too many Americans are taking on too much debt to earn college degrees of too little practical value.

Let us begin by probing the meaning of the question itself. What does it mean to say that an endeavor has value? What makes any human undertaking valuable? To say that an endeavor is valuable is to say that it is worth doing. But this does not get us very far; what does it mean to say that a human endeavor has worth? What is the source of worth and value?

Maybe we can make some progress if we note that human endeavors can have intrinsic value, which is to say that they are worth doing even if nothing further comes of them; and they can have instrumental or extrinsic value, which is to say that they are worth doing because they can be demonstrated to lead to other ends which are themselves valuable.

Hence, human endeavors like going to the dentist regularly are very, very important, but they are instrumentally valuable. We do not go to the dentist because we think that is a worthy endeavor for its own sake but because we believe that going to the dentist leads to a further end which we value, which is to retain our teeth in a healthy condition throughout our lives.

Does a liberal education have instrumental value because it leads to some further ends which themselves have value? Or does it have intrinsic value, such that we would count it as worth pursuing even if nothing further came of it?

**Liberal Education and Instrumental Value**

Let me begin with the matter of material or economic value, both because it is what seems to consume the media as the most important thing to talk about, and because the evidence here is clear; we can cover it, and then move on to deeper questions.

Is getting a bachelor’s degree in the domain of liberal education worth it in a material or economic sense? That is, does a bachelor’s degree have instrumental value because it leads to something else which people value, e.g., healthy income and lifetime earnings?

The answer is yes. To quote the author of a recent report in the *New York Times*, “A new set of income statistics answers those questions quite clearly: Yes, college is worth it, and it’s not even close. For all the struggles that many
young college graduates face, a four-year degree has probably never been more valuable” (Leonhardt, NYT, 5/27/14). According to a recent study issued by the Economic Policy Institute, “Americans with four-year college degrees made 98 percent more an hour on average in 2013 than people without a degree.”

In an extensive study, “The College Payoff: Education, Occupations, Lifetime Earnings,” by analysts at the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, the authors find that those with a bachelor’s degree will earn, on average, $1.5 million more than workers with only a high school diploma. In a previous study issued by the U.S. Census Bureau, whose findings have most certainly escalated since it was written, those with a master’s degree were found to earn around $400,000 more than those with a bachelor’s degree; those with a doctoral degree, $1.1 million more than those with a master’s degree; and those with a professional degree (a JD or an MD), $1 million more than those with a doctoral degree.

It goes without saying that earning a bachelor’s degree is a necessary condition of earning advanced degrees.

So is a college degree worth it? Does it have value, in this most instrumental, material sense? In a word, it is worth millions.

Some might suspect that most of those benefits accrue to graduates with business or pre-professional degrees, rather than those in the humanities. This is not the case. A study by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) compared earnings trajectories for graduates who majored in the humanities, arts, and social sciences with those whose undergraduate majors were in science and mathematics, engineering, or professional and pre-professional fields such as business and education.

The results: while the median earnings of engineering graduates are consistently higher than all the rest, by their peak earnings years those whose undergraduate major was in the humanities or social sciences actually earn, on average, $2,000 more annually than those who majored in professional or pre-professional fields.

What about student debt? Ever since the total amount of U.S. student debt outstanding passed the $1 trillion mark almost two years ago, media outlets, pundits, and politicians across the spectrum have been issuing dire pronouncements about the impact of this debt on both the individuals who owe it and the economy as a whole.

There is much to be concerned about here, but it is critical to examine where the debt is being accrued, and who is using it for what purposes. The Brookings Institution’s Brown Center on Education Policy released a carefully researched report that provides a corrective to the dominant media
narrative. In “Is a Student Loan Crisis on the Horizon?” co-authors Beth Akers and Matthew M. Chingos analyzed more than two decades of data to identify trends in student loan debt and its impact on the overall financial well-being of U.S. households headed by adults aged 20 to 40.

They found that the share of those households with education debt has indeed increased from 14% in 1989 to 35% in 2010, while the median debt per person has grown from $3,517 to $8,500, in 2010 dollars, in part driven by more Americans pursuing higher education, especially graduate degrees. But these are findings quite distant from the attention-grabbing, six-figure numbers that get invoked in popular discourse on this issue. In fact, Akers and Chingos found that only about a quarter of those with student debt had balances that exceeded $20,000, and just 4% owe more than $100,000.

Even more striking was the impact of student debt on household budgets. “Surprisingly,” the authors write, “the ratio of monthly payments to monthly income has been flat over the last two decades. Median monthly payments ranged between three and four percent of monthly earnings in every year from 1992 through 2010.” They attribute this finding to a combination of longer repayment terms (13.4 years in 2010 vs. 7.5 in 1992) and declining interest rates.

Their conclusion: “The transitory burden of loan repayment is no greater for today’s young workers than it was for young workers two decades ago. If anything, the monthly repayment burden has lessened.”

Income, earnings, and consideration of debt are one thing, but what about jobs? Does a liberal education degree have value in enabling graduates to find meaningful work and a fulfilling career?

First, consider unemployment rates. As of March 2014, the U.S. Department of Labor reported that unemployment for those with a high school diploma was 7.5%; for those with a bachelor’s degree it was 4%, for those with a master’s degree, 3.4%; and for those with a doctoral degree, unemployment was at 2.2%. In the most recent data reported, the overall unemployment rate stands at 6.2%, while the unemployment rate for those with a college degree or higher is half of that, 3.1%. So the answer is, again, a definitive, “yes” to the question of whether it is worth it to go to college.

But aspirations and assumptions about the instrumental value of a college degree with regard to employment are higher than simply having a job. Those attending college, and those who support them in doing so, might rightfully believe that our work, our profession, our career, is a dimension of our life through which we make significant contributions to the welfare of the world, and in so doing find meaning and a driving sense of purpose.
Therefore, let me turn to the question of the value of a liberal education, in particular, not simply for finding employment, but for launching one’s career. The Association of American College and Universities recently released the findings of a national survey of business and nonprofit leaders, probing what they sought in hiring, or the qualities and skills they thought essential for effective leadership in our global economy. The major findings are these, and I quote from the report:

- Nearly all employers surveyed (93 percent) say that “a demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than [a candidate’s] undergraduate major.”
- Even more (95 percent) say they prioritize hiring college graduates with skills that will help them contribute to innovation in the workplace.
- About 95 percent of those surveyed also say it is important that those they hire demonstrate ethical judgment and integrity; intercultural skills; and the capacity for continued new learning.
- More than 75 percent of those surveyed say they want more emphasis on five key areas including: critical thinking, complex problem solving, written and oral communication, and applied knowledge in real-world settings.
- 80 percent of employers agree that, regardless of their major, every college student should acquire broad knowledge in the liberal arts and sciences.9

Finally, 91% of respondents replied that “whatever their major, all students should have experience in solving problems with colleagues whose views are different from their own.”10

A liberal education, then, appears to be exactly the model of education tuned for acquiring the skills and qualities of mind and character that organizations value and the world needs.

These, then, are some of the instrumental values of a liberal education: career earnings, employability, and preparation for a meaningful career.

**Tectonics of Globalization: On the Political Value of Liberal Education for Global Citizenship**

I turn now to a deeper sense of instrumental value: education for effective citizenship in global civil society. I will make the case that liberal education offers political instrumental value in that it fosters the possibility of democratic social order, an end which is itself desirable.
For John Dewey, the mission of liberal education is nothing less than the reproduction of democratic society. Drawing on a long lineage of thinkers in some sense going back to the Greeks, Dewey acutely grasps that for democracy to flourish a society requires a citizenry that is first, sophisticated enough to be able to engage in deliberation about public policy formation; second, skilled in the arts of communicating across differences, since that is the very nature of democratic deliberation; and third, sufficiently equal in power and access to social goods that deliberation can be fully representative. For Dewey, the goal of liberal education is the preparation of a citizenry for democracy.

The philosopher and legal scholar Martha Nussbaum defines liberal education by reaching back to the Stoics. The project of liberal education is, as she says, the cultivation of humanity. In a book by that title and elsewhere, Nussbaum advocates an education designed to produce “citizens of the world,” people of cosmopolitan subjectivity, who see a world full of equally valuable human persons, all of whom have a claim on our sense of moral obligations. Nussbaum believes that the task of liberal education is to enable us to imagine the realities of peoples distant in time and space, to understand both what humanity has in common and the variety of ways in which it manifests itself. Through the reading of history, literature, and poetry and by the study of the social and natural sciences, liberally educated persons develop empathy without borders. Nussbaum, therefore, believes that the purpose of liberal education is to cultivate an ideal of cosmopolitanism and teach the critical reasoning skills that liberate one from ethnocentrism or from pernicious forms of nationalism.

The trajectory of globalization continues to unfold in ways that make liberal education, understood as education for global citizenship, ever more relevant, ever more valuable as an instrumental social good. Fareed Zakaria writes in *The Post-American World*:

> There have been three tectonic power shifts over the last five hundred years, fundamental changes in the distribution of power that have reshaped international life—its politics, economics, and culture. The first was the rise of the Western world, a process that began in the fifteenth century and accelerated dramatically in the late eighteenth century. It produced modernity as we know it: science and technology, commerce and capitalism, the agricultural and industrial revolutions. It also produced the prolonged political dominance of the nations of the West.  

This rise was financed by the juggernaut of European colonialism, which, fueled by avarice and arrogance, rolled over the globe claiming land and souls. Plantation slavery and the wealth produced within the colonialist economy played a dominant role in the rise of Western global hegemony. Zakaria continues:
The second shift, which took place in the closing years of the nineteenth century, was the rise of the United States. Soon after it industrialized, the United States became the most powerful nation since imperial Rome.... For most of the last century, the United States has dominated global economics, politics, science, and culture. For the last twenty years, that dominance has been unrivaled, a phenomenon unprecedented in modern history.14

The rest of his argument makes the case that “we are now living through the third great power shift of the modern era,” that the unitary supremacy of the United States has come to an end. His argument is that this shift in the global order is not the result of American complacency, nor is it a function of a failure in American foreign policy. Rather, as he says, it is not the fall of the West but the “rise of the rest.”

Alan Greenspan, in The Age of Turbulence, argues that the “rise of the rest” is due to the proliferation of market economies and liberal democracies.15 Greenspan goes country by country through Brazil, India, China, Russia, Japan, the nations of Europe, connecting the rise of global capitalism with the spread of liberal democracy, and, he argues, a global reduction in poverty and rise in longevity and general human welfare.

In other words, though their rhetorical and ideological projects differ, both Zakaria and Greenspan offer an analysis of the last century in which the West in general and the United States most recently have propagated a world system of a global market economy, undergirded by the spread of liberal democratic political systems and the rule of law. In their view, the crusade to spread these social systems has succeeded and—this is the key point—the success has created the global context within which the United States is being displaced.

The United States has used its considerable muscle and influence to champion global free trade. It has supported, even created by force, market economies in which it could secure influence. The irony with which we are struggling as a nation is that America has nurtured, fostered, and defended a world system that is displacing or overwhelming American privilege and influence.

With the “rise of the rest” and the global displacement of the United States, we are rapidly moving toward a world political and economic topography where power, privilege, and influence are more globally distributed.

This is not the same as saying that globalization is producing greater socioeconomic equality. Greenspan and Zakaria offer evidence that the proportion of people living in abject poverty is decreasing in much of what used to be called the developing world, and that measures of human welfare like longevity and infant mortality are improving. But, at the same time, global
capitalism is producing a globally distributed economic elite, and a resulting concentration of wealth that even Greenspan worries may threaten the rule of law and the prospects for market stability.

These are some of the problems an adequate education for global citizenship must address. Liberal education tuned for this era will enable students to understand their own positionality and those of others in the contemporary world system. The value of this kind of education is politically instrumental in two senses: the liberally educated individual will be a person with a more effective scope of agency, better able to navigate and effect change in global civil society, and in turn, a society of liberally educated citizens will be better able to deliberate about public policy and social justice. Hence, a liberal education tuned for this global era has considerable instrumental value both for the liberally educated and for society.

**The Intrinsic Value of Liberal Education**

I have addressed the questions of the instrumental worth of a liberal education in general because that is what seems to be of most immediate concern to students and their families, and it is certainly what is occupying the anxious imagination of the popular media.

The question I now turn to is this: Does pursuing a liberal education have intrinsic worth? That is, would it be worth doing even if nothing further came of it? Would it be worth choosing for its own sake, aside from all of its considerable instrumental value, both to the individual and to a society of liberally educated persons?

The answer is yes. To orient our thinking about the very idea of something being intrinsically valuable, consider a small range of human endeavors or experiences which we hold to have great worth in and of themselves. The candidates are surprisingly few, I believe, and include endeavors or experiences like: loving another person; engaging in worship for those who practice a faith; having an aesthetically moving experience of art or music or nature; practicing benevolence, kindness, generosity, or compassion.

I will make the case that to this list we should add the endeavor of becoming liberally educated. For one, with Nussbaum, I believe the case can be made that a liberal education cultivates our humanity in ways that enrich our capacity to appreciate the intrinsically worthy endeavors I have already mentioned. But that aside, I would suggest that the very endeavor of seeking understanding, of considering deeply and rigorously what is currently known in one’s quest for understanding, and to advance the depth and completeness of human understanding overall, are among the most intrinsically worthy or valuable endeavors in the human scope.
A liberal education is an expansion of consciousness; every book read, every natural or social system grasped, every theory or analytic technique one learns to employ, makes one a person with greater scope and agency. Every book or poem, film or equation, image or idea contemplated, expands and complicates one’s soul and enlarges one’s capacity to make meaning of the world.

Pursuing a liberal education in earnest is a kind of soulcraft; in the very process of liberal inquiry in the arts and sciences one is creating an identity, not just with greater breadth and depth of understanding, but also with greater capacity for action, greater freedom, and independence—both to pursue one’s own ends and to influence positively the well-being of the world.

In a quite literal sense, a liberal education is a project of changing one’s mind. Through a process of toil and struggle, of progress punctuated by failure and anxiety, students create an identity out of the raw materials of their studies and experiences. Seen this way, it seems hard to ask whether the endeavor of liberal education has intrinsic worth or value. If anything is worth doing for its own sake, it would have to be a strong candidate.

**The Ethics of Liberal Education for Global Citizenship: Cultivating Intercultural Respect**

In this last section, I take on Glaucon’s challenge to Socrates in Plato’s *Republic*: Is justice, ethical citizenship, intrinsically valuable such that it should be chosen for its own sake, regardless of any instrumental value that might attend to it? Above, I made the case that liberal education for global citizenship is worth pursuing for its political value, i.e., a liberally educated person will be able to exercise greater agency in global civil society, and a society of liberally educated citizens will be better equipped to govern democratically. Here, setting aside the instrumental political utility of liberal education, I ask, what is entailed in an ethics of global citizenship and is it worth pursuing for its own sake?

Essential to the argument are two premises. First, liberal education entails relational learning. As much as one associates independent judgment and critical thinking with liberal education, the process of liberal education assumes interdependent social relations throughout; liberal education is an undertaking that cannot possibly be done by oneself. Epistemologically, there is nothing independent about study. Learning emerges from the network of relationships students have, not just with their faculty, though these are fundamental, but also with their peers, with their coaches and counselors and conductors, advisors, and all of the staff who constitute a campus community. Students are also in a relationship with the authors of their books and articles, videos and lecturers, and all of the ideas, theories, postulates, facts,
and formulas encountered in their studies. This is what is meant when we say
that knowledge is socially constructed; it is the product of networks of social
relations encountered in dialogue, writing, media, and experience.

The social, relational nature of liberal inquiry is why diversity matters so
much in the enterprise of liberal education. The more homogeneous a com-
munity of learners, the less rich is the ferment for inquiry. Part of the meaning
of “liberal” in liberal education has to do with liberating oneself from the
confines of one’s personal experience; and there is no better way to do this
than by learning to listen and speak and collaborate with those who come
to the project with different backgrounds, different identities, and different
existential commitments.

We would not be able to go about our business of liberal inquiry if we had
campuses of faculty, staff, and students who represented only one point of
view. That is never the case, of course. But put in the positive, the knowledge
created relationally is made more complete and reliable with the more points
of view that are productively engaged in the mix. It is through the very pro-
cess of triangulating different points of view, understanding the differences,
and seeking the possibility of reconciliation that new knowledge is created.
This is why diversity is constitutive of excellence for a liberal arts college.
And this is why colleges have an obligation, as institutions concerned with
educational excellence, to strive to become diverse and inclusive communities
of learners that have represented within them broad diversities of identities—
racial, ethnic, religious, gender, national, political, and socioeconomic. Only
by providing a campus community where students can learn with and from
people who see the world differently can a college provide the epistemic con-
text for a liberal education for global citizenship. The mandate is implicit in
the mission.

Colleges do not expect students—or anyone—to be free of ignorance or
to join the mission without gaps and lapses in their understanding. Further-
more, colleges must be highly tolerant of untested ideas, incomplete theories,
ungrounded beliefs, or opinions that are not fully informed. By engaging in
the relational project of liberal education, participants—students, faculty, and
staff alike—must expect to have their partial understanding challenged, their
untested ideas tested.

Karl Popper reminds us that all knowledge is partial, that there is no such
thing as final truths, but only truths that are more complete or less.16 And
how do truths move in the direction of completeness? By having our own
current beliefs vigorously challenged, relentlessly examined, and modified by
what we read, what we see and hear, but most important through dialogue in
the form of human relationships.17
The project of inquiry is not to discover eternal truths, but systematically to eliminate ignorance, prejudice, and error. Popper writes:

What we should do ... is to give up the idea of ultimate sources of knowledge, and admit that all knowledge is human; that it is mixed with our errors, our prejudices, our dreams, and our hopes; that all we can do is to grope for truth even though it is beyond our reach. ... If we thus admit that there is no authority beyond the reach of criticism to be found within the whole province of our knowledge ... then we can retain, without danger, the idea that truth is beyond human authority. (p. 29)

Popper maintains that inquiry is a systematic project of critical dialogue, given and received in the form of human relationship. Popper exemplifies such an approach this way:

(If you are interested in the problem which I tried to solve by my tentative assertion, you may help me by criticizing it as severely as you can; and if you can design some experimental test which you think might refute my assertion, I shall gladly, and to the best of my powers, help you to refute it.

Popper's methodology requires both permanent, principled openness and freedom to contest authority or received wisdom. He suggests that these kinds of dialogic relations are the only mode that we have of exposing the prejudice and partiality of one's own favorite truths. He adds that there is tremendous epistemic utility to approaching critical dialogues with humility, generosity, and openness. Thus, the first premise is that a liberal education for global citizenship can be pursued adequately only in a community of learners characterized by diversity actively engaged in relational pursuits of advancing understanding.

Diversity, however, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for liberal education. The second premise of the argument is that the quality of relations sufficient for liberal education and for the social construction of knowledge has to be characterized by a robust ethic of respect.

Put a different way, liberal education presupposes an ethic of mutuality and respect. Though, of course, in every campus community one will find these dynamics in some form, the internal logic of liberal education precludes racism, homophobia, gender bias, religious intolerance, or the other kinds of prejudice that exist in the larger societies. These forms of prejudice inflict harm, not just to members of campus community, but to the very mission or purpose of liberal education. These forms of prejudice preclude, rather than foster, the seeking of knowledge and understanding. They close minds rather than open them. And they can make campuses hostile climates for some of their members. This hostility, in turn, undermines their ability to thrive in
their own educational endeavors, to contribute fully and freely even as they seek their own aspirations. In thwarting the open participation of any, the prospects for advancing understanding are hampered for all.

Thus, the entire enterprise of liberal education requires communities of learners wherein differences are treated with respect. This is the cardinal virtue of a liberal education and a basic tenant of an ethic of global citizenship.

For a philosophical elaboration for what is catalyzed by respect, we can look to Immanuel Kant. In his 1785 treatise on ethical theory, the title of which we translate as *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, he outlines what could be seen as the philosophical groundwork of contemporary conceptions of human rights grounded in a principle of respect.

In this work, Kant is searching for the fundamental principles to guide human relationships: How do people deserve to be treated, and why? After a great deal of careful reasoning, he comes to this basic principle:

> We must always act so as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only.18

Later he says that “this principle is the supreme limiting condition of the actions of each person,” meaning that whatever degree of freedom one might have, it never extends to treating another only as a means to one’s own ends. What does it mean to treat other persons as ends-in-themselves and never merely as means?

The central idea is that every human being deserves to be treated with dignity and respect, that in all of our interactions, even, or especially, with those with whom we disagree, or who we don’t like, or even who disgust us in some way, that we must engage them in ways that recognize their humanity.

Why do this? What is the nature of this obligation? What is the basis of human dignity? For Kant, what is metaphysically distinct about humans is that we have free will, that is, we can make choices and control our behavior according to the exercise of reason. It is only because of this that humans have the capacity for morality; if one can’t choose, one can’t choose otherwise, so creatures that are not capable of rational choice are not capable of ethical deliberation—that is, they are not capable of critically reflecting on how they ought to act.

We can. And for Kant this makes all the difference. The capacity for choice, for ethics, gives humanity a rare quality of dignity. We have what he calls “intrinsic worth.” This dignity, or worth, imposes limits on how others should treat us and on how we should treat others. That is, to repeat, we
should always treat another person as an end, as a being with worth and dignity that must be respected.

Notice that all forms of prejudice choose some surface feature of identity—race, ethnic or national or sexual identity, religious confession—and focus on this as a purported grounds for not deserving equal respect. Kant helps us see how shallow and wrongheaded all forms of prejudice are.

Hence, since liberal education requires respectful, dialogic relations within communities of learners, we now can say that those relations must aspire to recognize the ideal of human dignity. To respect the humanity, the dignity, of others entails respecting their religious beliefs and practices, their cultural particularities, and their sexual autonomy and the ways all of these are inflected by their racial, ethnic, and gender identities.

In sum, I have attempted to make this case. The endeavor of liberal education is essentially relational, and as such, is made more robust and complete in communities of learners rich with diversity. For the goals of the endeavor to be realized, this diversity needs to be engaged by all participants with an ethic of respect. Hence, liberal education both requires and cultivates this ethic; it is woven into the fabric of what it means to be liberally educated. The question, Does this endeavor have intrinsic value, would it be worth choosing for its own sake even if nothing further came of it? becomes the question, Why choose an ethic of respect?

I have tried to make the case that the answer has to do with the qualities of mind that are the goals of liberal education. They are of value not only for their instrumental worth, or for their political utility as a social good, but also for the qualities of character cultivated in those who earnestly pursue a liberal education.

Conclusion

Is a liberal education worth pursuing? I have made a case that liberal education has considerable instrumental value measured both in economic terms and in its contribution to democracy and global civil society. In addition, I have argued that it has intrinsic value and would be worth pursuing even if nothing further came of it. That is, liberal education is the collaborative project of making meaning and extending human understanding. What is more, its undertaking both requires and cultivates an ethic of respect for intrinsic value. Hence, the answer is yes, a liberal education is very much a worthy endeavor, of value both for those who undertake it and for the societies in which they live.
Notes

2. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
14. Ibid.