

# Re-thinking Liberal Education: Making the Case for Instrumentalism

Response to Gatley  
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Gatley's paper examines a critical question in philosophical discourse, and more broadly public policy, on the question of the purpose (the utility) of liberal education. In my view, to answer that question requires attention to an antecedent question, namely, what is the purpose of education?

The answer to this question will depend on whether the person giving the answer is an educational theorist or practitioner versus a politician or policy maker, or a philosopher. Let's do a quick survey of answers to this question over the last 100 years or so. Here I am relying on a very helpful infographic posted by ASCD. In 1934, John Dewey, writing in *The Philosopher* journal in an article entitled "Individual Psychology and Education," articulated the purpose of education as:

...giv(ing) the young the things they need in order to develop in an orderly, sequential way into members of society. This was the purpose of the education given to a little aboriginal in the Australian bush before the coming of the white man. It was the purpose of the education of youth in the golden age of Athens. It is the purpose of education today, whether this education goes on in a one-room school in the mountains of Tennessee or in the most advanced, progressive school in a radical community... Any education is, in its forms and methods, an outgrowth of the needs of the society in which it exists.<sup>1</sup>

Martin Luther King in a speech at Morehouse College in 1948 said, "The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. But education which stops with efficiency may prove the greatest menace to society. The most dangerous criminal may be the man gifted with reason but no morals... We must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education."<sup>2</sup> Most recent-

ly, in 1991, Arthur W. Foshay, writing in an article entitled “The Curriculum Matrix: Transcendence and Mathematics” in the *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, argued that the one continuing purpose of education is to bring people to as full a realization as possible of what it means to be a human.<sup>3</sup>

From these three definitions, I would craft a simple definition as follows: The purpose of education is the facilitation of the development of the young with capacities which enable them to realize their full potential as members of society. If this merged and simplified definition is accepted or if any of the individual authoritative ones are, then we are at a place to ask the narrower question: What is the purpose (utility) of a liberal education?

Having answered the prior question, we must now answer this subsequent question. In seeking to do a quick survey of how this question is answered, I googled the words: “The purpose of a liberal (arts) education.” I received some helpful, at least indicative, responses. Lyon College says, “A liberal arts education builds students into freethinkers, open communicators, knowledgeable citizens, and respectable individuals.”<sup>4</sup> Jill Tiefenthaler, in an April 2013 Hechinger Report article, argues, “A liberal education—including, for example, philosophy, art, and sociology as well as math and physics—educates the whole person, and prepares students to excel in a range of careers and, most importantly, live lives rich with meaning and purpose. A liberal-arts education teaches students to learn how to learn and inspires them to go on learning throughout their lives.”<sup>5</sup> Princeton University states on its admissions page, “By exploring issues, ideas, and methods across the humanities and the arts, and the natural and social sciences... [students]... will learn to read critically, write cogently and think broadly. These skills will elevate your conversations in the classroom and strengthen your social and cultural analysis; they will cultivate the tools necessary to allow you to navigate the world’s most complex issues.”<sup>6</sup>

The common thread running through these three characterizations is that liberal education focuses on creating citizens who possess a breadth of perspective born of a capacity to think critically. Such qualities are intrinsically valuable, but the question which Gatley asks is: is that enough?

Gatley seeks to answer this question by juxtaposing two poles or

alternatives, namely the question of intrinsic value, and one end, and instrumentalism, at the other. Relying on White among others, she cuts through the seeming dichotomy and posits that while liberal education does have intrinsic value, the fact that a thing, anything, may have intrinsic value does not make it intrinsically worthwhile. The same is therefore true of a liberal education. In short, being intrinsically worthwhile does not make something a thing of value. So, the value of a liberal education cannot be founded on its intrinsic worth, and therefore does not for the fact that it has intrinsic value warrant being promoted to students.

Gatley builds on this, somewhat, categorical position stating, "... the intrinsic value of knowledge does not provide a secure foundation for prescribing a curriculum primarily focused on knowledge. This is because even if knowledge is intrinsically valuable, it is not necessarily educationally valuable, or the best contender for curriculum inclusion. Some other account of why a broad theoretical education might be worthwhile is required."<sup>7</sup> But she seemingly hastens to add that "...the problems with intrinsic value of knowledge accounts of liberal education do not mean that the idea of a liberal education ought to be abandoned...."<sup>8</sup> This position that while there are problems with liberal education does not mean that it should be abandoned, appears to resonate with that of the foregoing practitioners, such as Princeton University. Gatley's solution is that of a "both, and" not an "either, or."

The perspectives of the practitioners mentioned above are supported by Gatley, who further argues that having these new ways of seeing the world should contribute to quality of living and free conduct from wrong, and thus theoretical activities have instrumental value. In other words, education must have an instrumental purpose. In this regard, "intrinsicity" (to coin a phrase) and instrumentality are not mutually exclusive. Gatley addresses the apparent symbiotic relationship between the intrinsic and the instrumental thus: "Acquiring theoretical content is the equivalent of becoming informed, and someone who is well-informed has a practical advantage over someone who is uninformed or ill-informed across a range of domains. On this view, a liberal education is a broad and balanced education into the most useful theories available to humankind."<sup>9</sup>

I wish I could find bases for disagreeing with Gatley. Perhaps that would make my response more interesting, but I do not. I agree with her arguments. The basic package of her views is that liberal education should enable the student to function effectively in the world, and relying on Peters', she suggests that should provide guidance for decision-making primarily concerned with truth, and as such, pursuing truth through theoretical activities is always educational.

### CONCLUSION

In short, a liberal education should provide students with the capacity to solve problems; grasping theories must be towards some end of functioning effectively in the world. My conclusion then is that the intrinsic value of anything, including a liberal education, is found in its instrumental value, and in the case of a liberal education, its value is found in the degree to which it shapes students' worldview and enables them to function effectively, particularly in problem-solving and enriching the life experiences of others. Thus, curriculum is useful to the extent that it enables students to function in an increasingly complex, networked, diverse, hostile, competitive, and standards-agnostic world.

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1 John Dewey, "Individual Psychology and Education," *The Philosopher* 12, no. 1 (1934): 1.

2 Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Purpose of Education" (Speech, Morehouse College, Atlanta, 1948).

3 Arthur W. Foshay, "The Curriculum Matrix: Transcendence and Mathematics," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 6, no. 4 (1991).

4 Lyon College, "What is the Purpose of a Liberal Arts Education?" <https://www.lyon.edu/what-is-the-purpose-of-a-liberal-arts-education>.

5 Jill Tiefenthaler, "The Value of a Liberal Arts Education," *The Hechinger Report*, April 10, 2013, <https://hechingerreport.org/the-value-of-a-liber->

[al-arts-education/](#).

6 Princeton University, “What Does Liberal Arts Mean?” <https://admission.princeton.edu/academics/what-does-liberal-arts-mean>.

7 Jane Gatley, “A Utility Account of Liberal Education,” *Philosophy of Education* 76, no. 2 (2020).

8 Gatley, “A Utility Account.”

9 Gatley, “A Utility Account.”