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FEATURES:  
Liberal Education, Then and Now

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*J.S. Mill's idea of a university, and our own.*

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TOC](#)

A n auto repair shop in which mechanics and owners could not distinguish a wreck from a finely tuned car would soon go out of business. A hospital where doctors, nurses, and administrators were unable to recognize a healthy human being would present a grave menace to the public health. A ship whose captain and crew lacked navigation skills and were ignorant of their destination would spell doom for the cargo and passengers entrusted to their care.

Yet at universities and colleges throughout the land, parents and students pay large sums of money for — and federal and state governments contribute sizeable tax exemptions to support — liberal education, despite administrators and faculty lacking a coherent idea about what constitutes an educated human being. To be sure, American higher education, or rather a part of it, is today the envy of the world, producing and maintaining research scientists of the highest caliber. But liberal education is another matter. Indeed, many professors in the humanities and social sciences proudly promulgate in their scholarship and courses doctrines that mock the very idea of a standard or measure defining an educated person and so legitimate the compassless curriculum over which they preside. In these circumstances, why should we not conclude that universities are betraying their mission?

To be sure, universities and colleges put out plenty of glossy pamphlets containing high-minded statements touting the benefits of higher education. Aimed at prospective students, parents, and wealthy alumni, these publications celebrate a commitment to fostering diversity, developing an ethic of community service, and enhancing appreciation of cultures around the world. University publications also proclaim that graduates will have gained skills for success in an increasingly complex and globalized marketplace. Seldom, however, do institutions of higher education boast about how the curriculum cultivates the mind and refines judgment. This is not because universities are shy about the hard work they

have put into curriculum design or because they have made a calculated decision to lure students and alumni dollars by focusing on the sexier side of the benefits conferred by higher education. It's because university curricula explicitly and effectively aimed at producing an educated person rarely exist.<sup>1</sup>

Universities do provide a sort of structure for undergraduate education. Indeed, it can take years for advisors to master the intricacies of general curriculum requirements on the one hand and specific criteria established by individual departments and proliferating special majors and concentrations on the other. The Byzantine welter of required courses, bypass options, and substitutions that students confront may seem like an arbitrary and ramshackle construction. In large measure it is. At the same time, our compassless curriculum gives expression to a dominant intellectual opinion. And it reflects the gulf between the requirements of liberal education and the express interests of parents, donors, professors, and students.

The dominant opinion proclaims that no shared set of ideas, no common body of knowledge, and no baseline set of values or virtues marking an educated human being exist. To be sure, the overwhelming majority of all American colleges adopt a general distribution requirement.<sup>2</sup> Usually this means that students must take a course or two of their choosing in the natural sciences, social sciences, and the humanities, with perhaps a dollop of fine arts thrown in for good measure. And all students must choose a major. Although departments of mathematics, engineering, and the natural sciences maintain a sense of sequence and rigor, students in the social sciences and humanities typically are required to take a smattering of courses in their major, which usually involves a choice of introductory classes and a potpourri of more specialized classes, topped off perhaps with a thesis on a topic of the student's choice. But this veneer of structure provides students only the most superficial guidance. Or rather, it sends students a loud and clear message: The experts themselves have no knowledge worth passing along concerning the core knowledge and defining qualities of an educated person.

Take two political science majors at almost any elite college or university: It is quite possible for them to graduate without ever having read the same book or studied the same materials. One student may meet his general distribution requirements by taking classes in geophysics and physiological psychology, the sociology of the urban poor and introduction to economics, and the American novel and Japanese history while concentrating on international relations inside political science and writing a thesis on the dilemmas of transnational governance. Another political science major may fulfill the university distribution requirements by studying biology and astronomy, the sociology of the American West and abnormal psychology, the feminist novel and history of American film while concentrating in comparative politics and writing a thesis on the challenge of integrating autonomous peoples in Canada and Australia. Both students will have learned much of interest but little in common. Yet the little in common they learn may be of lasting significance. For both will absorb the implicit teaching of the university curriculum, which is that there is nothing in particular that an educated person need know.

The interests of the different groups involved in producing, purchasing, and consuming higher education also create obstacles to reforming the contemporary curriculum. University

education is a peculiar good. Generally speaking, and particularly at elite universities, those who receive the service, the students, do not pay for it. Instead, the cost of undergraduate education is borne by parents, wealthy donors, and taxpayers through exemptions and government grants for faculty research support. At America's finest private universities, parents pay about \$50,000 a year to put their children through college, or approximately \$200,000 for a bachelor's degree. For that hefty price tag, parents understandably want a credential that enables their sons and daughters to land good jobs and gain entrance to valuable social networks. But what of the character and quality of their children's education? No less an observer of the American scene than Tom Wolfe recalls an unplanned opening remark he made in 1988 to a group of graduating Harvard seniors:

You know, I come from a town, New York City, where families are rated according to whether or not their children get into Harvard. But I have never met a single parent — not one — who has ever shown the slightest curiosity about what happens to them once they get here or what they may have become by the time they graduate.<sup>3</sup>

Distant and dispersed, parents can monitor their children's academic performance, which is measurable by grades, but even if they were concerned they would be in a weak position to evaluate, much less influence, course content and curriculum structure. Besides, professors and administrators are the experts.

At most elite universities, student tuition rarely covers more than two-thirds of the full cost of education. Much of the other third comes from alumni through new gifts and investment earning on endowment or old gifts. Alumni establish chairs, fund buildings, and sponsor university-wide programs and initiatives. As with parents, alumni interests do not necessarily coincide with the requirements of a liberal education. Having made their mark in the world, alumni look at the university suffused with warm remembrances of their carefree college days. They may donate out of a commitment to basic research and liberal education. They may also donate for a variety of other reasons: to give back to the institution that helped launch their adult lives, to reconnect with their youth, and, not always least, to provide a dramatic demonstration to fellow alumni of their worldly success. Universities aggressively encourage alumni to give large sums of money but frown upon their playing a role in overseeing how the money is spent — for professors and administrators are the experts.

The capacity of alumni who seek to ensure that their donations are spent in accordance with their intentions, particularly if their intention is to promote liberal education, is extremely limited. For example, in 1995 Yale University was forced to return a 1991 gift of \$20,000,000. Donor Lee Bass wanted to support the creation of a program for undergraduate study in Western civilization. One would have thought that such an undertaking would fit easily with Yale's mission. But during the four years that Yale held the Bass money, the faculty could not come to agreement about the benefits of such a program or how to implement it. Many members of the faculty regarded a program on Western civilization to be so narrowly conceived or political in character as to infringe on their right and responsibility to make curriculum decisions on academic grounds. In addition, faculty complained loudly to the administration about a request made by the donor, late in the controversy, to have a voice in the approval of university decisions about how to fill professorships created by his gift. For

they are the experts.

This brings us to the impediment posed by professors to the reform of the contemporary curriculum. In fact, whereas parents' and donors' interests may fail to coincide with the requirements of a liberal education, professors' interests increasingly diverge from those requirements. Because advancement in today's academy is closely tied to scholarly achievement and publication record, it is in professors' interests to teach narrowly focused and highly specialized courses. Here, professors assign scholarship that underpins their own approach, examine cutting-edge contributions to the field, and perhaps review work that is critical of their way of doing things. Such courses can be a valuable ingredient in an undergraduate education. But generally and for the most part these courses, which often represent a substantial portion of departmental offerings, serve to advance professors' research programs and to train professional scholars, though few undergraduates will go on to be professors.

Finally, one must consider students' interests. On the one hand, often just having left their parents' home but not yet having become responsible for supporting themselves, students are as fresh and open to learning as they will ever be. On the other hand, like their parents, they are, with reason, credential conscious, keenly interested in launching their careers and gaining access by means of their college degree to the right people and the right networks. And they present a classic case in which expressed preferences or interests and actual interests are likely to differ. This is because the capacity to make an informed decision about the structure and value of a liberal education itself depends on a liberal education, or on a knowledge of the subjects — history, literature, philosophy, natural science, ethics and politics broadly understood, and religion — that have for at least 150 years been thought to stand at its center. Many are the students at fine American colleges and universities who have remarked wistfully in the days before graduation that only now, as they prepare to depart, do they feel capable of choosing wisely and cobbling together for themselves out of the hodgepodge of university offerings a coherent slate of classes. But even those days may be passing, as universities increasingly fail to give students more than a dim intimation that a liberal education has a distinctive shape and a coherent and cumulative content.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, if parents, alumni, professors, and students are happy, why worry? So what if universities, for lack of a standard, are unable to say whether their graduates are well-educated? A college degree remains a hot commodity, a ticket of entry to valuable social networks, a signal to employers that graduates have achieved a certain proficiency in manipulating concepts, performing computations, and getting along with peers. If universities continue to offer parents a good return on investment, donors a pleasant place to practice philanthropy, professors good research opportunities, and students a convivial four years in which to get ready for their careers, why not leave well enough alone? And supposing that some harm is inflicted on students through exposure to foolish ideas and sloppy intellectual habits, the fact is that undergraduate education lasts only four short years. How seriously in that brief time can university education injure students? In any case, once they leave campus, graduates will encounter the everyday world of work, spouses, mortgages, and children. Won't their new responsibilities, by focusing their minds and disciplining their habits, overcome any lingering bad effects of their educations?

This way of thinking about the university is common and dangerously complacent. We would not be content to learn that our auto repair shops cause no permanent damage to our cars, our hospitals are not systematically making patients sicker, and our captains and crews are not sinking their ships. So why should we be content to conclude that our universities do no lasting harm to the country's young men and women?

In fact, universities *can* cause lasting harm. In many cases, the mental habits that students form and the ideas they absorb in college consolidate the framework through which as adults they interpret experience, assign weight to competing claims and values, and judge matters to be true or false and fair or inequitable. A university that fails to teach students sound mental habits and to acquaint them with enduring ideas handicaps its graduates for both public and private life.

Moreover, properly conceived, a liberal education provides invaluable benefits for students and the nation. For most students, it offers the last chance, perhaps until retirement, to read widely and deeply, to acquire knowledge of the opinions and events that formed them and the nation in which they live, and to study other peoples and cultures. And the nation benefits as well, because a liberal democracy presupposes an informed citizenry capable of distinguishing the public interest from private interest, evaluating consequences, and discerning the claims of justice and the opportunities for — and limits to — realizing it in politics. Indeed, a sprawling liberal democracy whose citizens practice different religions and no religion at all, in which individuals have family heritages that can be traced to every continent, and in which the nation's foreign affairs are increasingly bound up with local politics in countries around the world is particularly dependent on citizens' acquiring a liberal education.

In no small measure, the value of a liberal education comes from a distinctive quality of mind and character that it encourages: the ability to explore moral and political questions from a variety of angles. This involves putting oneself in another's shoes, distinguishing the essential from the contingent, imagining the contingent as other than it is, and reasoning rigorously without losing sight either of what is or what ought to be.

John Stuart Mill was convinced that cultivation of the virtue that in *On Liberty* he called "many-sidedness"<sup>5</sup> is at the heart of a liberal education. Mill defends this conviction most fully and forcefully in a little known but remarkable work, originally entitled "Inaugural Delivered to the University of St. Andrews on February 1st 1867."<sup>6</sup> Mill was 60, and the delivery of a formal address on liberal education was an obligation that came with his election by students to the post of honorary Lord Rector of the University, which he held from 1865 to 1868 (during which time he also served as an independent member of Parliament). Although he never taught at or even attended a university, Mill was among the best-educated men then alive, perhaps England's premier public intellectual, and certainly its leading student of modern liberty. At the same time, he was intimately familiar with commerce and foreign affairs, thanks to the more than 30 years he had spent working in the office of the British East India Company. So he was well suited to take up the challenge of exploring the contribution that a liberal education, well understood, can make to the many dimensions of life in a free society.

Yet it is not Mill's "Inaugural Address" but Cardinal John Henry Newman's *The Idea of a University* that has come to be regarded as the classic statement on the aims and benefits of a liberal education. A collection of lectures delivered to Irish Catholic laymen in Dublin between 1852 and 1858, *The Idea of a University* certainly deserves the high regard in which it is held. Still, its preeminence is surprising. Newman's contention that liberal education culminates in the acquisition of religious truth rests on assumptions about knowledge and faith very different from those on which most university education in America today rests. This does not undermine the value of Newman's analysis, least of all from the perspective of a liberal education. But it does suggest that Mill's short essay, which both rests on assumptions about knowledge and faith shared by most university education today and challenges the contemporary university curriculum, has a distinctive contribution to make.

Like Newman's mid-nineteenth-century discourses, Mill's essay from the same period requires some translation, some separating of educational principle from particular conclusions about the appropriate content of the university curriculum. For example, Mill suggests that "the leading facts of ancient and modern history" should not be taught at universities because if students have not mastered the facts by the time they get to college, then it's too late for them to learn. For an age such as our own, in which universities do not expect, much less require, students to acquire even a rudimentary knowledge of history, Mill's judgment will sound absurdly harsh. Yet his underlying point, that historical knowledge is an essential component of a liberal education and that it must be acquired in order to progress to later and higher stages of understanding, does not depend on contingent features of a Victorian English sensibility. Rather, it reflects a compelling opinion about the enduring structure and abiding imperatives of a liberal education.

## II. Mill's idea of a university

In the opening lines of his address, Mill calls attention to the vastness of his topic and the need to combine learning and freshness of mind in exploring it. Indeed, among the chief benefits that flow from studying Mill's address on liberal education is the lesson he provides throughout in combining goods often thought to be mutually exclusive. By stressing at the outset the wisdom of custom along with the need for creativity and insisting on the riches of what has been said about education in past ages and also the challenge of carrying the conversation forward into the future, Mill highlights the dependence of liberal education on both conserving and progressing.

As the serious study of education encourages a liberal mind, so too does it require one:

For, of all many-sided subjects, it is the one which has the greatest number of sides. Not only does it include whatever we do for ourselves, and whatever is done for us by others, for the express purpose of bringing us somewhat nearer to the perfection of our nature; it does more: in its largest acceptance, it comprehends even the indirect effects produced on character and on the human

faculties, by things of which the direct purposes are quite different; by laws, by forms of government, by the industrial arts, by modes of social life; nay even by physical facts not dependent on human will; by climate, soil, and local position. Whatever helps to shape the human being; to make the individual what he is, or hinder him from being what he is not, is part of his education.

While it does not nearly cover the whole of education, the university's mission, which is to provide a liberal education, is essential to preparing students to understand the other constitutive elements of education, or the variety of material, moral, and political forces that form the mind, shape character, and direct judgment.

Liberal education concerns "the culture which each generation purposely gives to those who are to be its successors, in order to qualify them for at least keeping up, and if possible for raising, the level of improvement which has been attained." Professional education is something different. The professions belong under the superintendence of the university, but they are not part of, and must not be allowed to displace, "education properly so-called," or that cultivation of the mind and transmission of knowledge on which further progress depends. Mill does not mean to denigrate the professions or to deny that there is a vital moral dimension to the practice of law, medicine, and business. The question is the most effective manner in which higher education can contribute to making professionals moral: "Men are men before they are lawyers, or physicians, or merchants, or manufacturers; and if you make them capable and sensible men, they will make themselves capable and sensible lawyers or physicians." In other words, the cultivation that they bring to professional schools from their liberal education goes a long way to determining whether professionals practice their trade sensibly and decently.

Nor should a university, Mill argues, be concerned with elementary instruction. Students ought to acquire the basics before arriving so that universities can concentrate on providing students with a "comprehensive and connected view" of the fields of human knowledge, "the crown and consummation of a liberal education." Yet he acknowledges that universities must adjust to realities. When, as in mid-nineteenth-century Scotland, high schools fail to perform their part, universities have no choice but to play a remedial role. At the same time, universities must sometimes break with tradition, as those in Scotland led the way in doing by incorporating in their curricula the study of natural science and the systematic study of morality. In deciding what to include in the curriculum and how to establish priorities, universities should focus on their role in "human cultivation at large," or the making of an educated person. It is to this task that Mill devotes the remainder of his address.

The content of the higher education curriculum was hotly debated in Mill's time, and the liberal education he championed represented a serious correction of traditional university education. The controversy was over whether general education should be classical and literary or scientific. This was a continuation of the early modern quarrel over whether the university should focus on the ancients or the moderns, immortalized in Jonathan Swift's *A Full and True Account of the Battle Fought Last Friday, between the Ancient and the Modern Books in St. James's Library* (1704). In Mill's view, the quarrel had a clear and compelling solution: Teach both.

But wasn't study of classical languages a tedious and consuming undertaking? Mill was acutely aware of the sterile manner in which universities taught Greek and Latin, concentrating on rote memorization, mechanical translation, and mindless verse composition. At the same time, having learned both languages before he was ten, he insisted that the teaching of the classics at the university level could be made considerably more efficient, creating room to study the natural sciences, and considerably more educational by concentrating on the content of classical writings. Of course, dividing the curriculum between literary studies and science meant that students would be unable to specialize in either. But from Mill's point of view, this was a salutary consequence. He regarded specialization, the learning of more and more about a single subject, as a potential enemy of liberal education. If practiced prematurely, it dwarfs individual minds and threatens human progress. In contrast, liberal education aims to teach students a subject's "leading truths" and "great features." Such knowledge does not make students masters of a field or discipline, but it does enable them to recognize the masters and form intelligent judgments about expert opinion. It also fits them for study of "government and civil society," which Mill considers "the most complicated of all subjects accessible to the human mind."

Mill would confine literary study at the university to classical languages and literatures. This is not because he doubted that knowledge of foreign languages and literatures in general was valuable. Indeed, he observed a half-century before Wittgenstein that such knowledge is intrinsically valuable because it prevents the confusion of words with objects and facts and enables us to understand other peoples by understanding the terms through which they interpret the world. But a university must establish priorities. Although students should know modern languages, they learn them best, Mill insists, out of school through a few months living abroad among native speakers. Accordingly, liberal education should concentrate on the languages and literature of the ancients, of the Greeks and Romans, because of both their farness and their nearness. On the one hand, the circumstances and sensibility of classical authors differ the most profoundly from ours (without being, Mill stipulates, like those of Asia, "so totally dissimilar, that the labor of a life is required to enable us to understand them"). On the other hand, their writings are rich in the wisdom of the common life of humanity. The classics both challenge our moral and political assumptions and provide models of human excellence. Particularly the writings of Plato and Aristotle represent "the perfection of good sense." Moreover, the complex logical structure of the grammar of classic languages disciplines the mind. And classical authors do not embroider. In their writings, "every word is what it should be and where it should be." Yet to rely entirely on the classics, he is keen to point out, is to miss an important dimension of humanity. They lack that appreciation, which characterizes modern poetry, of the mind as "brooding and self-conscious." Nevertheless, Mill concludes that like the learning of modern foreign languages, so too the study of modern literature can and should be undertaken outside the university.

As with classical languages and literatures, Mill gives the natural sciences a place of honor in a liberal education, both because of their content and because of the intellectual discipline they foster. While it is not to be expected that many will achieve mastery of the laws to which the physical world is subject, students should acquire the basics that will enable them to distinguish those who are competent to provide the public advice on scientific and technological matters. In addition, science provides "a training and disciplining process, to fit



the intellect for the proper work of a human being.” This is because “the processes by which truth is attained, reasoning and observation, have been carried to their greatest known perfection in the physical sciences.” Mill would not scant the study either of empirical science or mathematics and logic. He would also include in the curriculum an introduction to what he regarded as a young and imperfect science, physiology, because of its usefulness in making decisions about public sanitary measures and personal hygiene and because its subject, the physical nature of man, sheds more light on social and political life than any of the other physical sciences. He would also include psychology, which overlaps with physiology and explores the laws of human nature. The great philosophical controversies to which psychology gives rise, Mill maintains, in no way disqualify it as a subject fit for study at the university. To the contrary: “it is a part of liberal education to know that such controversies exist, and, in a general way, what has been said on both sides of them.”

The literary and scientific studies that form the foundation of a liberal education should culminate in “that which it is the chief of all the ends of intellectual education to qualify us for — the exercise of thought on the great interests of mankind as moral and social beings — ethics and politics, in the largest sense.” These great subjects have “a direct bearing on the duties of citizenship.” Students should begin with the close and familiar, the major civil and political institutions of their own country, and then move outward in their studies to the civil and political institutions of other countries. Then they should learn about the laws of social life, particularly political economy, which deals with “the sources and conditions of wealth and material prosperity for aggregate bodies of human beings”; jurisprudence, or the philosophical, moral, and institutional foundations of law; and the law of nations, which “is not properly law, but a part of ethics: a set of moral rules, accepted as authoritative by civilized states.” The principal readings on ethics and politics should be drawn from both contemporary authorities and what today we would call the great books, but only “on condition that these great thinkers are not read passively, as masters to be followed, but actively, as supplying materials and incentives to thought.” Here too, Mill stresses, liberal education can only provide an introduction. But the well-crafted introduction to ethics and politics in the largest sense confers a benefit “of the highest value by awakening an interest in the subjects, by conquering the first difficulties, and inuring the mind to the kind of exertion which the studies require, by implanting a desire to make further progress, and directing the student to the best tracks and the best helps.”

The “inevitable limitations of what schools and universities can do” comes into focus in considering the place of morality and religion in the university curriculum. It is not the place of schools in general and universities in particular, Mill holds, to provide the principal instruction in these matters:

It is the home, the family, which gives us the moral or religious education we really receive: and this is completed, and modified, sometimes for the better, often for the worse, by society, and the opinions and feelings with which we are there surrounded. The moral or religious influence which a university can exercise, consists less in any express teaching, than in the pervading tone of the place.

The tone is set by the manner and spirit in which professors discharge their duty to seek truth and transmit knowledge:

Whatever [the university] teaches, it should teach as penetrated by a sense of duty; it should present all knowledge as chiefly a means to worthiness of life, given for the double purpose of making each of us practically useful to his fellow-creatures, and of elevating the character of the species itself; exalting and dignifying our nature.

Professors teach by example, but the most important example they set involves the integrity they bring to learning and thinking.

In teaching the history of morals and religion, professors must resist the powerful temptation to proselytize for their favorite moral and religious — or immoral and irreligious — doctrines:

There should be, and there is in most universities, professorial instruction in moral philosophy; but I could wish that this instruction were of a somewhat different type from what is ordinarily met with. I could wish that it were more expository, less polemical, and above all less dogmatic. The learner should be made acquainted with the principal systems of moral philosophy which have existed and been practically operative among mankind, and should hear what there is to be said for each: the Aristotelian, the Epicurean, the Stoic, the Judaic, the Christian in the various modes of its interpretation, which differ almost as much from one another as the teachings of those earlier schools. He should be made familiar with the different standards of right and wrong which have been taken as the basis of ethics: general utility, natural justice, natural rights, a moral sense, principles of practical reason, and the rest. Among all these, it is not so much the teacher's business to take a side, and fight stoutly for some one against the rest, as it is to direct them all towards the establishment and preservation of the rules of conduct most advantageous to mankind.

But then liberal education requires professors both to maintain an open and flexible mind and to favor the great liberal and Enlightenment aspiration to articulate universal principles of right conduct. Does it not thereby take the side of the moderns against the ancients, of reason against faith, of liberalism and Enlightenment against romantic and conservative critics? And is this not a contradiction or an invitation to hypocrisy?

In fact, tensions inherent in liberal education do present a stiff challenge for educators. A liberal education reflects and reinforces a modern, liberal, and enlightened sensibility, and it does serve democracy based on equality in freedom. Faculty, Mill suggests, should be self-aware and candid about these presuppositions of the education they provide. At the same time, liberal education as he conceives it is particularly well-equipped to resist the descent into didactic or dogmatic education provided that it heeds its own imperatives to appreciate what modernity owes tradition, the knowledge of diversity and common humanity acquired through study of the classics, and the dependence of freedom on studying the history of rival and incompatible teachings on ethics, politics, and religion.

Although professors must never compel their students to embrace one or another side in the great historical debates about how human beings should organize their private and public lives, they cannot help but make judgments about truth and falsity in teaching the history of moral and religious ideas:

There is not one of these systems which has not its good side; not one from which there is not something to be learnt by the votaries of the others; not one which is not suggested by a keen, though it may not always be a clear, perception of some important truths, which are the prop of the system, and the neglect or undervaluing of which in other systems is their characteristic infirmity. A system which may be as a whole erroneous, is still valuable, until it has forced upon mankind a sufficient attention to the portion of truth which suggested it. The ethical teacher does his part best, when he points out how each system may be strengthened even on its own basis, by taking into more complete account the truths which other systems have realized more fully and made more prominent. I do not mean that he should encourage an essentially skeptical eclecticism.

But the encouraging of a “skeptical eclecticism” is more of a danger inherent in liberal education than Mill allows. Passing from the examination of one system of morals and religion embraced by its proponents as the whole truth to another and then on to another and another can be disorienting. Professors must be able to place ideas in context without reducing them to their context, which requires knowledge of both and a sense of proportion. Indifference, hastiness, or haughtiness — to name a few of the vices to which professors may be prone — at the head of a class on the history of morality and religion risks engendering in students a moral relativism that treats all ideas as equally valid or a nihilism that holds all claims about justice and the human good to be equally false. Thus does the abuse of liberal education produce the opposite of a liberal spirit.

Liberal education requires professors to make evaluative judgments in the classroom because they are essential to the teaching of the great systems of ideas about how human beings should organize their private and public lives. However, these judgments must be put in the service of forming students capable of fashioning their own judgments:

While placing every system in the best aspect it admits of, and endeavoring to draw from all of them the most salutary consequences compatible with their nature, I would by no means debar him from enforcing by his best arguments his own preference for some one of the number. They cannot be all true: though those which are false as theories may contain particular truths, indispensable to the completeness of the true theory. But on this subject, even more than on any of those I have previously mentioned, it is not the teacher’s business to impose his own judgment, but to inform and discipline that of his pupil.

While a liberal education unavoidably reflects the needs and ethos of a liberal society, the needs and ethos of liberal society call for an education that is essentially Socratic in character. But a Socratic education, in its classical form, requires a Socrates for a teacher and students of surpassing gifts. The liberal education that deserves public support in a liberal democracy represents a democratization of Socratic education insofar as it is made widely available. But it also preserves an aristocratic root, remaining dependent to a high degree on virtue, or the qualities of mind and character that teachers and students bring to it.

Liberal education is the civic education, or education for citizenship, proper to liberal democracy because it aims to form a human being fit for freedom:

The proper business of a University is . . . not to tell us from authority what we ought to believe, and make us accept the belief as a duty, but to give us information and training, and help us to form our own belief in a manner worthy of intelligent beings, who seek for truth at all hazards, and demand to know all the difficulties, in order that they may be better qualified to find, or recognize, the most satisfactory mode of resolving them.

By remaining aloof from narrow partisan politics, liberal education makes a critical political contribution, doing its large but limited part to form citizens capable of both conserving and improving a free society.

But liberal education aims at more than civic education, in part because in a free society citizenship is not the only, or in many cases the highest, sphere in which individuals reasonably hope to flourish. Liberal education also prepares students for, though it does not provide, what Mill calls aesthetic education, or “the culture which comes through poetry and art, and may be described as the education of the feelings, and the cultivation of the beautiful.” Indeed, at the end of his address, Mill exhorts the students of St. Andrews to appreciate the deepest and most enduring benefits of a liberal education:

Now is your opportunity for gaining a degree of insight into subjects larger and far more ennobling than the minutiae of a business or a profession, and for acquiring a facility of using your minds on all that concerns the higher interests of man, which you will carry with you into the occupations of active life, and which will prevent even the short intervals of time which that may leave you, from being altogether lost for noble purposes. Having once conquered the first difficulties, the only ones of which the irksomeness surpasses the interest; having turned the point beyond which what was once a task becomes a pleasure; in even the busiest after-life, the higher powers of your mind will make progress imperceptibly, by the spontaneous exercise of your thoughts and by the lessons you will know how to learn from daily experience. So, at least, it will be if in your early studies you have fixed your eyes upon the ultimate end from which those studies take their chief value — that of making you more effective combatants in the great fight which never ceases to rage between Good and Evil, and more equal to coping with the ever new problems which the changing course of human nature and human society present to be resolved.

The highest justification of liberal education is that by forming free and well-furnished minds it prepares students to fashion for themselves a good life.

### III. Liberal education and Mill's larger liberalism

The central importance to Mill's idea of a liberal education of drawing truth from rival systems of opinions and goods reflects the spirit of the larger liberalism to which his voluminous

writings are devoted. For example, in *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), he seeks to give both the free market and government intervention their due. In *On Liberty*, he shows how the formation and flourishing of free individuals depend on the discipline of virtue, education, the family, and civil society. In *Considerations on Representative Government* (1862), he emphasizes the need both for a party of order, whose main tasks are to maintain the basic framework within which political life takes place and to conserve what society has achieved, and a party of progress, whose guiding purpose is to implement more fully a free society's promise of liberty and equality under the law. In *The Subjection of Women* (1869), he makes an impassioned case for the formal equality of women while respecting differences between the sexes. And in his *Essays on Religion* (1874), which Mill chose to have published posthumously, he seeks to give expression to a religious sensibility that respects the power as well as the limits of reason.<sup>7</sup>

But nowhere does he more forcefully demonstrate the practical and theoretical necessity of combining presumed contraries than in his tributes to the progressive rationalist Jeremy Bentham (1838) and the conservative romantic Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1840), which Mill published while editor of the *London and West Minster Review*.<sup>8</sup> To appreciate the audacity of his contention that both the thought of Bentham and the thought of Coleridge are essential, imagine a contemporary progressive intellectual declaring in a left-of-center journal that, say, both John Rawls and Allan Bloom are indispensable thinkers of our age.

In Mill's judgment, Bentham's progressive rationalism was blind to the intricacies of human affairs. But in part because of that blindness, Bentham was able to focus his intellectual energies, expose much nonsense in the common language used to discuss morals and politics, and bring to light inefficiencies and injustices in the organization of social and political life. At the same time, Coleridge's conservative romanticism, Mill contended, was blind to the positive features of modern society and to the advantages of modern systematic empirical inquiry. But, again, in part because of that blindness, Coleridge could concentrate on discerning the wisdom embodied in traditional practices and on making vivid the shared values and social bonds on which political life, even liberal and democratic political life, depended. Through his appreciation of their strengths and weaknesses, Mill aims to demonstrate the necessity of the progressive and conservative minds, and the superiority to both of the liberal mind.

In his tribute to Coleridge, Mill observes that the manner in which Bentham and Coleridge each supplied an essential perspective lacking in the other illustrated "the importance, in the present imperfect state of mental and social science, of antagonist modes of thought." Lest one think that Mill wrote in the expectation that anytime soon such need would diminish, he instead looks forward to when it "will one day be felt" that antagonist modes of thought "are as necessary to one another in speculation, as mutually checking powers are in a political constitution." In fact, this necessity is enduring, and for good reason. It is not grounded in "indifference between one opinion and another," but rather in the irreducible diversity of knowledge's sources and the abiding process of comparing and contesting ideas by which truth comes to light.

Twenty-five years before he delivered his St. Andrews address and sketched the liberal education that can be seen as a fortification against it, Mill warned in his tribute to Coleridge

of “the besetting danger” to which moral and political understanding was subject:

All students of man and society who possess that first requisite for so difficult a study, a due sense of its difficulties, are aware that the besetting danger is not so much of embracing falsehood for truth, as of mistaking part of the truth for the whole. It might be plausibly maintained, that in almost every one of the leading controversies, past or present, in social philosophy, both sides were in the right in what they affirmed, though wrong in what they denied and that, if either could have been made to take the other’s views in addition to its own, little more would have been needed to make its doctrine correct.

This suggests a test to determine whether the education a university provides is liberal in the large sense. It is to be expected, and indeed welcomed, given differences in background, talents, and tastes, that some students will, on reflection, become progressives and some conservatives. But universities that purport to provide a liberal education will be failing in their mission unless their graduates, progressives and conservatives alike, prove capable of sympathetically understanding the positions of the political party to which they do not belong and discerning what is true and enduring in the beliefs of their partisan opponents.

For Mill, the virtues cultivated by a liberal education sustained a higher form of toleration. Of course the political toleration involved in suffering the expression of an opinion one knows to be false or foolish is indispensable to liberty of thought and discussion in a free society. But respecting a person’s right to be wrong is not the only form of toleration. Respecting a person’s right to be right about truths one is inclined to find awkward or disconcerting is imperative to the flourishing of thought and discussion in a free society. A liberal education transforms this imperative into a pleasure.

#### IV. Reforming the twenty-first-century university

Mill’s nineteenth-century analysis of liberal education is relevant to the twenty-first-century university not for the specific curriculum he proposes but because of the larger principles he outlines and the greater goods he clarifies. His analysis suggests several lessons. First, a liberal education aims to liberate the mind by furnishing it with literary, historical, scientific, and philosophical knowledge and by cultivating its capacity to question and answer on its own. Second, a liberal education must, in significant measure, provide not a smorgasbord of offerings but a shared content, because knowledge is cumulative and ideas have a history. Third, a liberal education must adapt to local realities, providing the elementary instruction, the stepping stones to higher stages of understanding, where grade school and high school education fail to perform their jobs. Fourth, the aim of a liberal education is not to achieve mastery in any one subject but an understanding of what mastery entails in the several main fields of human learning and an appreciation of the interconnections among the fields. Fifth, liberal education is not an alternative to specialization, but rather a sound preparation for it. Sixth, a liberal education culminates in the study of ethics, politics, and religion, studies

which naturally begin with the near and familiar, extend to include the faraway and foreign, and reach their peak in the exploration, simultaneously sympathetic and critical, of the history of great debates about justice, faith, and reason. Seventh, all of this will be for naught if teaching is guided by the partisan or dogmatic spirit, so professors must be cultivated who will bring to the classroom the spirit of free and informed inquiry.

What might a four-year curriculum for a liberal education, devised in accordance with these lessons, look like? No doubt a variety of reasonable answers is possible, particularly in a nation as large and diverse as the United States, in which students can choose among private research universities, small liberal arts colleges, state universities of many sizes and descriptions, and religious colleges. And owing to differences in aptitude and interest, a liberal education will not be for everybody. Nevertheless, some elements are simple and straightforward and will be common to all colleges and universities that wish to provide students a liberal education worthy of the name. For starters, in view of the sorry state of high school and grade school education in the country,<sup>9</sup> the curriculum will need to contain a large remedial element. In view of the need created by our advanced economy for depth or specialization, the curriculum will continue to require students to choose a major to concentrate in during their last two years. Most importantly, in view of the need for breadth, or knowledge of the civilization of which one is a part and of other civilizations, the curriculum should have a solid core.

As with the other parts of the curriculum, the structure and content of the core will be subject to legitimate dispute and reasoned compromise. Also, as with the rest of the curriculum, the core must strike a balance between the realities of education in America and the enduring imperatives of liberal education. It should not revolve around any single one of the main models for a core curriculum — general distribution requirements, great books, survey courses, or the modes of inquiry approach — but should partake of elements of all four.<sup>10</sup> And it should not suppose that there is one right path or a single correct syllabus for the courses it contains. But faculty should fashion common core courses whose purpose is to awaken interest, sharpen critical thinking, and provide students with a shared store of essential knowledge and fundamental questions.

As it happens, crafting a core consistent with the demands of a liberal education will involve both a substantial break with today's university curriculum and a long overdue alignment of higher education with common sense. Such a core would, for example, require all students to take a semester course surveying Greek and Roman history, one surveying modern European history, and one surveying American history. It would require all students to take a semester course in great works of European literature and one in American literature. It would require all students to take a semester course in biology and one in physics. It would require all students to demonstrate proficiency in a foreign language by carrying on a casual conversation and accurately reading a newspaper in the language, a level of proficiency usually obtainable after two years of study or four semester courses. It would require all students to take a semester course in the principles of American government, one in general economics, and one in the history of political philosophy. It would require all students to take a semester course comparing Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. And it would require all students to take a semester course of their choice in the history, literature, or religion of a non-Western civilization.

Such a core is at best an introduction to liberal education. Still, students who met its requirements would also have acquired a common intellectual foundation that would enhance their understanding of whatever specialization they chose, improve their ability to debate politics responsibly, and enrich their appreciation of the delightful and dangerous world in which they live.

It is a mark of the clutter of our current curriculum and the confusion that it spreads that these requirements will strike many faculty and administrators, and perhaps also students, as so onerous as to be a nonstarter for a serious discussion about curricular reform. Yet assuming four courses a semester and 32 to graduate, such a core could be completed in the first two years of undergraduate study. Students who met the foreign language requirement through high school study would have time left over in their first two years for four elective courses. Moreover, the core would still allow students during their junior and senior years to choose their own major, devote ten courses to it, and take six additional elective courses. And for students majoring in the natural sciences, where it is necessary to take a strict and lengthy sequence of courses, options should be available to enroll in introductory and lower level courses in one's major during freshman and sophomore year and complete the core during junior and senior year.

Nevertheless, reform confronts formidable obstacles. The principal one is professors.<sup>11</sup> Many will fight such a common core because it would require them to teach classes outside their area of expertise or reduce the number of students for boutique classes on highly specialized topics. Moreover, one can expect protracted battles over the content of the social science and humanities component of the core of the sort that eventually led Yale to return that \$20 million gift that was meant to support study of Western civilization. Meanwhile, as I have noted, students and parents are poorly positioned to effect change. Students come and go in four years, and, in any event, the understanding they need to make the arguments for reform is acquired through the very liberal education of which they are currently being deprived. Meanwhile, parents are far away and otherwise occupied and have too much money on the line to rock the boat.

But there are opportunities for those who will seize them. Change could be led by an intrepid president, provost, or dean of a major university who knows the value of a liberal education, possesses the eloquence to defend it to his or her faculty and the public, and has the skill and clout to wield institutional incentives on behalf of reform.<sup>12</sup> Change could also be led by trustees and alumni at private universities who acquire larger roles in university governance and by alumni who connect their donations to reliable promises from universities that their gifts will be used in furtherance of liberal education, well understood. And, not least, some enterprising smaller college or public university, taking advantage of the nation's love of diversity and its openness to innovation, might discover a market niche for parents and students eager for an education that serves students' long-term interests by introducing them in a systematic manner to the ideas and events that formed their civilization, the moral and political principles on which their nation and those of other nations are based, and languages and civilizations that differ from their own.

Reforming the university is as urgent as the obstacles to it are formidable. Citizens today confront a mind-boggling array of hard questions concerning, among other things, the



balance of liberty and security at home; war and peace in faraway lands; the challenges some civilizations face in achieving liberty and democracy and others face in promoting them; the extent of the public's responsibility for the poor, the sick, and the elderly; management of the extraordinary powers science provides for caring for, and manipulating, nascent human life, the unborn, and the frail and failing; the worldwide threats to the environment and appropriate national and transnational measures to combat them; the impact of popular culture on private conduct; the meaning of marriage and the structure of the family; and the proper relation between religion and politics. No citizen can be expected to master all the issues. But liberal democracies count on more than a small minority's acquiring the ability to reason responsibly about the many sides of these many-sided questions. For this reason, liberal democracies depend on colleges and universities' supplying their students a liberal education. Today's educators could scarcely find a better way to begin to recover an understanding of the aim of a liberal education and their obligation to provide it than by studying John Stuart Mill's Inaugural delivered to the University of St. Andrews in 1867.

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Bok, who served as Harvard University president from 1971 to 1991 and has exercised a commanding position in American higher education for 35 years, has written the most authoritative recent book on the troubles that beset undergraduate education. *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should be Learning More* (Princeton University Press, 2006) is in many ways illuminating. But there are bright lines that Bok, currently interim president at Harvard, cannot or will not permit himself to cross. He breezily dismisses charges leveled over the past 20 years, mainly by conservatives, most influentially by Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), that the undergraduate curriculum lacks a unifying purpose, that intellectual standards have been allowed to deteriorate, that undergraduate education is increasingly oriented toward preparing students for jobs, and that faculty neglect students in favor of scholarship. Against the conservative critics, Bok assures us that he "find[s] good reason for the satisfaction of most alumni with their education." Yet he undercuts his assurance by proceeding to describe an alarming array of failures in undergraduate education that belie alumni satisfaction and fit well with the conservatives' critique: "Many seniors graduate without being able to write well enough to satisfy their employers. Many cannot reason clearly or perform competently in analyzing complex, nontechnical problems, even though faculties rank critical thinking as the primary goal of a college education. Few undergraduates receiving a degree are able to speak or read a foreign language. Most have never taken a course in quantitative reasoning or acquired the knowledge needed to be a reasonably informed citizen in a democracy. And those are only some of the problems" (1–8, 310–312). In response to these failings, Bok argues effectively that universities should "conduct useful studies to evaluate existing educational programs and assess new methods of instruction" (320). And he is right to insist on the need to improve the quality of teaching and learning on campus (324–325). But he provides no reason to believe that progress will be made without reforming the compassless curriculum and the politicized classroom.

<sup>2</sup> Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, 257.

<sup>3</sup> Richard H. Hersh and John Merrow, eds., *Declining by Degrees: Higher Education at Risk*

(Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), xi.

<sup>4</sup> Bok contradicts himself on what can be learned about higher education from the opinions of students and parents. First, he asserts that undergraduate education can't be as bad as the critics contend because parents continue to pay the bills and students and graduates continue to express satisfaction with their college experience (*Our Underachieving Colleges*, 7–8). Then he subverts his defense of the status quo by acknowledging that students' concerns about social and professional advancement deflect their attention from questions about the quality of the curriculum (26–27, 36–37). Similarly, Bok mocks those who doubt that students are the best judges of the quality of their education and then endorses the proposition that they are not (compare 6–7 with 310–312, 325–326, 334). Concerning parents, Bok subsequently agrees that they are in a poor position to form a responsible opinion about the quality of their children's college education: "The faculty's reputation has far more to do with research than with education, since few people outside a campus have any idea how effectively its professors teach, let alone how much its students learn" (*Our Underachieving Colleges*, 328).

<sup>5</sup> *On Liberty*, in *Essays on Politics and Society*, J.M. Robson, ed. (University of Toronto Press, 1977), 252.

<sup>6</sup> The address appears in *Essays on Equality, Law, and Education*, J.M. Robson, ed. (University of Toronto Press, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> This section draws on Peter Berkowitz, "When Liberalism Was Young," *Claremont Review of Books*, Summer 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Both appear in *Essays on Ethics, Religion, and Society*, J.M. Robson, ed. (University of Toronto Press, 1969).

<sup>9</sup> "A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education," a Report of the Commission Appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings (September 2006), 7–8.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of these and their limitations, see Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, 255–280.

<sup>11</sup> See also Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, 31–57, 313–320, 323–325, 334.

<sup>12</sup> See also Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, 335–343.

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