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Ennobling of
Democracy

THE CHALLENGE OF THE
POSTMODERN AGE

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The Ennobling of Democracy: The Challenge of the Postmodern Age

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9 / Retrieving Civic Education as the Heart of American Public Schooling

In his 1990 State of the Union Address, President George Bush restated the themes and commitments enunciated at the "Education Summit" he had held a half year before with the governors of the United States. He spoke of expanding programs to prepare disadvantaged preschool children to learn; he set as a goal a sharp increase in the percentage of students who complete high school; he spoke of the need to assess student performance at critical stages in education, in order to make "diplomas mean something"; he called for school discipline. Each of these goals is worthy and was worth stressing. But surely something was missing from this attempt to outline the goals of a proper educational policy. What was striking was how little the president had to say regarding the *content* of education. What was remarkable was his almost complete silence about which sorts of lessons were or ought to be considered truly important. On only one point was there specificity—and there the clarity was unmistakable: "By the year 2000, U.S. students must be first in the world in math and science achievement." There was indeed a single passing reference, in the context of a call for literacy, to the fact that education must somehow prepare Americans to be *citizens*. But otherwise the education being discussed might well be regarded as an education aimed simply at the acquisition of the skills needed to work and compete well in a modern, technological world economy.

Nothing testifies more vividly to the loss, in American democracy, of clarity about the most important goal of public education in a republican society. I say "the most important goal." For of course the concern for an

education that prepares men and women to be effective, useful members of the work force is an essential and even a noble concern—if, or insofar as, it is placed in a proper republican perspective. After all, skilled workers can be well-trained slaves. What makes the difference between a well-trained, efficient slave and a free human being? Does not education of a certain kind play an important, even the critical, role in this regard?

To this last question, the classical republican tradition delivers a resounding affirmative answer. It is “liberal education” that makes the difference between a free human being and a slave. But what is “liberal education?” So fluffy and banal has this expression become in our time that we need to exert some effort to recover the original meaning of this “liberal” educational ideal, as first articulated in Plato’s *Laws* and *Republic*, and rearticulated in Aristotle’s *Politics* and Xenophon’s *Education of Cyrus*. To quote Plato’s Athenian Stranger, what divides a liberal education from an educational that is, however sophisticated and elaborate, nevertheless “vulgar, illiberal, and wholly unworthy to be called education” is this: liberal education is “the education from childhood in virtue, that makes one desire and love to become a perfect citizen who knows how to rule and be ruled with justice” (*Laws* 643b–644a).

Education in republican citizenship, an education that induces a passionate, loving commitment to civic participation in a just political order, does not exhaust the meaning of “liberal education” in the original, Platonic sense; but it is the heart of what Plato primarily means by “liberal education.” The most important stages of such an education, the Athenian Stranger goes on to argue, are the early stages: when habits, tastes, and aspirations are formed; when heroes and objects of emulation and reverence are set before the imagination’s eye; when a communal sense of shared destiny is shaped; when gratitude to the past and responsibility for future generations is instilled; when capacities for collective deliberation and action, for leadership and loyalty, are discovered, tested, and celebrated. The curriculum for this kind of education should be centered on poetry, music and dance, song and saga, history and drama, and, above all, religion.

This early civic and moral and religious public education is aimed mainly at formation of character, at the education of the heart rather than of the mind. This means to say that Platonic “liberal education” has another, higher dimension. This higher dimension, in its strictest sense, is philosophy; and in his discussion of the education of philosophers in book 7 of the *Republic*, Socrates identifies education in philosophy strictly speaking as “dialectics.” But he simultaneously makes it clear that dialectics cannot be

directly cultivated by public schooling. At most, public schooling can cultivate the soil or prepare the ground in which individuals, in informal groups of friends, can nourish true philosophic education. Yet Plato’s Socrates also shows that philosophic education, understood as centered on dialectics, presupposes an earlier moral and civic commitment that does depend, to a large extent, on the less intellectual civic dimension of liberal education. Why so? Why does philosophic education in the Socratic sense depend so much on civic education? It is only on the basis of the earlier formation of passionate moral commitments that the quest for *the truth* (which Plato’s Socrates makes clear is an essential presupposition of true dialectics, as opposed to “eristics,” or sophistry) can be launched. It is this moral seriousness that is the foundation for the basic distinction between citizens and philosophers devoted to the truth, on the one hand, and mere intellectuals, or traffickers in ideas who are infatuated with the sound of their own names, on the other. Hence, from the Socratic point of view, there is every reason to focus attention on civic and moral education.

Now it is only fair to note that the president’s State of the Union Address did, contrary to initial appearances, and unlike the declarations made at the time of the “Education Summit,” make room for some substantial and serious reference to liberal education in this classical republican sense. But what is remarkable—and yet so familiar to, and indeed characteristic of, our world—is that the president treated the themes of moral education, not in the context of his discussion of public schooling, but rather in his peroration, where he dwelt on the themes of “faith and family.” There the president exhorted grandparents, “our living link to the past,” to “tell the story of struggles waged, at home and abroad. Of sacrifices freely made for freedom’s sake.” He reminded parents that “your children look to you for direction and guidance.” “Tell them,” he urged, “of faith and family. Tell them we are one nation under God. Teach them that of all the many gifts they can receive, liberty is their most precious legacy. And of all the gifts they can give, the greatest—the greatest is helping others.”

In a tradition that reaches back to Pericles, the president invoked the morally educative, rhetorical authority of his supreme magistracy. In a tradition that is distinctly modern, and is deeply imbedded in the United States, the president kept these higher and more important themes of education out of his discussion of the institutions and policies of organized public schooling. The philosophic basis for this distinctively liberal or modern educational vision is to be found in the treatises of John Locke, above all others. Yet if it is the strongest, Locke’s is nevertheless not the sole great voice that speaks

from within the original American conception of moral education. In order to retrieve and reconsider the American conception in all its rich and potentially fruitful controversy, we need to move from a summary view of Locke's notions to a survey of the founding generation's diverse reactions to, and modifications of, those Lockean notions.

As observed in the previous chapter, Locke speaks repeatedly of the importance of moral education for the success of a free civil society, while yet insisting that moral education is "the duty and concern of parents" rather than of government. Locke teaches one to be deeply uneasy about government-sponsored moral and civic education, because religion tends to be at the heart of such education; and Locke aims to provide the foundation for a *liberal* political society characterized, not merely by a separation of church and state, but by an unprecedented privatization, an extreme disestablishment, of religion.

But it is not only Locke's concern with liberating individual souls from the coercive hand of governmental authority that leads him to recommend private education at home; for Locke is as severely critical of *private* schools, or academies, as he is of public or state-supported schools. In order to see the full significance of Locke's attack on schooling in the name of education, we need to bear in mind the sharply contrasting position of Milton, whose essay on education, published when Locke was a young man, continued the classical republican educational tradition and applied it to the English-speaking world. Milton positively advocates *collective* education, in which young men leave their private homes to live together in troops or platoons housed in barracks. The value of learning to live and act together with others in a *team* spirit is regarded as an essential preparation for the duties of citizenship and militia service. In Milton's proposed English academies, to be erected in every city, an hour each day was to be devoted to swordsmanship and wrestling, with a view to moral as much as to physical education: "to inspire them with a gallant and fearless courage, which being tempered with seasonable lectures and precepts to them of true fortitude and patience, will turn into a native and heroic valor, and make them hate the cowardice of doing wrong."¹ For Milton envisages a republic with a citizen militia rather than a standing professional army. This facet of Miltonian or classical republicanism lives on in the second article of the U.S. Bill of Rights, guaranteeing "the right of the people to keep and bear arms" on the grounds that "a well regulated Militia" is "necessary to the security of a free State." The

right to keep and bear arms is no part of Lockean natural rights, and in his educational treatise, Locke says nothing about preparing the young for military service. What is more, he draws attention to the pernicious influence of crowds of inevitably rude and rowdy boys have upon one another's character development as reasonable, peace-loving, and industrious beings. He argues for the advantages that might accrue from an educational reform that would assimilate the education of boys to that traditionally bestowed on *girls*; indeed, his whole treatise may be said to intend the transformation of boys' education on the model of that of girls. Locke describes in glowing terms the control that might be achieved over boys' environments if they were brought up, as their sisters traditionally were, in the bosom of the private home, under the loving and painstaking supervision of the parents, and with the assistance of a carefully selected and well-paid private tutor.

Locke tried to persuade the upper classes to devote much more of their time, money, and thought to the upbringing of their children than was the custom in his or earlier times. One might say that Locke makes the challenge of educating, of governing or ruling, one's own children (the heirs to one's own property) an attractive and more natural supplement to, or even replacement for, the classical challenge of a public life participating in political rule. Locke directed his message to the upper class because he saw no prospect, in the foreseeable future, of families in a lower station possessing the leisure and financial resources required to carry out the time-consuming, difficult, and complex labor that he conceived to be necessary for a truly sound and effective moral education. But Locke makes it clear that he hopes and expects that a reform, under his auspices, of upper-class education, character, and outlook will have a profound long-run impact on the way of life of the whole nation: speaking of his treatise, he says in the Epistle Dedicatory, "I would have every one lay it seriously to heart," though, he adds, "that most to be taken care of, is the Gentleman's Calling. For if those of that Rank are by their Education once set right, they will quickly bring all the rest into Order."

The goal of Lockean moral education is an enlightened self-interest grounded in rational self-control. The self-control is buttressed, and the self-interest is enlarged, by a sense of dignity, rooted both in shrewd management of private property, and in the unheroic, but solid, good name or recognition bestowed by one's similarly rational and independent-minded neighbors.

The primary task dictated by this goal is instilling into children a capacity to master their "natural inclinations"—their "natural *wrong* inclinations" as Locke puts it. According to Locke, the human being is naturally inclined

1. John Milton: "Areopagitica" and "Of Education," with *Autobiographical Passages from Other Prose Works*, ed. George Sabine (Northbrook, Ill.: AHM Publishing, 1951), 69.

to a lust for power and dominion that tends to violent conflict; and nowhere is this clearer, Locke suggests, than in little children, especially "at play." Human beings need to acquire, artificially, the inner rule of reason if they are to escape from a kind of chaotic, mutually threatening sociability (the "state of nature," which reproduces itself on every playground in the world); but human nature is such that it does not automatically possess, or even naturally grow toward, such self-rule by reason.

The defects or disorders of the mind to which education must respond are not ascribed by Locke to sin or to the Fall, and, accordingly, Locke never suggests that the remedy for them is to be found in fear of God, or hope and prayer for divine grace and redemption, or admission of guilt of any sort. In his very brief discussion of the child's religious instruction, Locke stresses that the child should at all costs be prevented from fearing God in any way. The proper remedy for the *natural* disorder of the soul is an artificial implantation, beginning when very young, of habits of self-control, resting initially on fear of the parents, and eventually on a reconstruction of the natural lust for power, together with a modulation of the natural desires for liberty and pleasure. What can give rationality or virtue its greatest strength in the human heart are "*Esteem and Disgrace*," which "are, of all others, the most powerful Incentives to the Mind, when once it is brought to relish them" (*Some Thoughts concerning Education*, sec. 56). The mind can be brought to such relishing because the natural desire for power can easily be linked to prestige, whose conventional character allows it to be shaped by the environment of praise and blame. In a rational Lockean environment, praise and blame will always be closely correlated with the display or lack of display of reasonableness. Children, Locke says, "love to be treated as Rational Creatures sooner than is imagined. 'Tis a Pride should be cherished in them, and as much as can be, made the greatest instrument to turn them by" (*ibid.*, sec. 81).

Lockean education culminates in the inculcation of the social virtues, which represent the rational, constructed or artificial, antidote to the naturally vicious and irrational proclivities of human sociability: "Children who live together," Locke says,

often strive for Mastery, whose Wills shall carry it over the rest: Whoever begins the Contest, should be sure to be crossed in it. But not only that, but they should be taught to have all the *Deference, Complaisance and Civility* for one another imaginable. This when they see it procures them respect, Love and Esteem, and that they lose no Superiority by it, they will take more Pleasure in, than in insolent Dominating. (*Ibid.*, sec. 109)

Justice, in the strict sense, depends on the respect for private property, and since children can, strictly speaking, own no property, they can know no justice. Still, they can be brought *toward* a sense of justice, or toward understanding of and respect for others' property, through being shown in a vivid way the meaning of labor (Locke says children should manufacture all their own toys, with the help of their tutors and parents) and by being taught the goodness of the virtue of generosity, and the evil of the vice of covetousness. Appealing to love or to sacrifice is *not* the proper method of instilling the virtue of generosity. Generosity is not charity, and Locke does not suggest children be taught charity. One succeeds in making children reliably generous by showing them that they will eventually profit and acquire more if they are first generous: "let them find by Experience," writes Locke,

that the most *Liberal* has always most plenty, with *Esteem* and *Commendation* to boot, and they will quickly learn to practise it. . . . This should be encouraged by great *Commendation* and *Credit*, and constantly taking care, that he loses nothing by his *Liberality*. Let all the Instances he gives of such *Freeness*, be always repaid, and with Interest. (*Ibid.*, sec. 110)

The keystone of the social virtues is what Locke calls *civility*—a word to which he gives a new centrality and significance. *Civility*, as Locke uses the term, does *not* refer to political leadership, statcraft, or even citizenship: it is a *social* rather than a civic or political virtue, embodying an egalitarian sentiment of humanity. Indeed, while Lockean civility is observant of conventional distinctions of rank and station, this social virtue replaces the Christian or biblical virtue of humility in the lists as the opponent of the vice of vainglory—and also of the vice (which Aristotle, of course, called a leading virtue) of aristocratic *pride*. "We ought not," declares Locke,

to think so well of our selves, as to stand upon our own Value; and assume to ourselves a Preference before others, because of an Advantage, we may imagine, we have over them; but modestly to take what is offered, when it is our due. . . . Civility of the Mind . . . is that general Good will and regard for all People, which makes any one have a care not to shew, in his Carriage, any contempt, disrespect, or neglect of them. (*Ibid.*, secs. 142–43)

The New American Conception of Civic Education

By the middle of the eighteenth century, the influence in America of Locke's educational treatise, partly by way of intermediaries such as John Clarke and Isaac Watts, was massive. Testifying vividly to this state of things is the

most remarkable American contribution to the discussion of education in midcentury, Benjamin Franklin's *Proposals relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania* (1749), coupled with his "Idea of the English School" (1750).² Franklin cites Obadiah Walker and Charles Rollin as well as Milton, but it is manifestly taken for granted that *the* supreme educational authority for Franklin and his readers is John Locke. Nevertheless, however numerous and substantial the explicit borrowings from, and implicit dependence on, Locke's theory of education and of human nature, we cannot fail to notice that Franklin's whole project departs in a decisive respect from Locke: and the nature of the departure may be said to be archetypal of the distinctively American path in education.

Franklin's project was the establishment of a school, an academy, representing the avant-garde of a grand new army of private (and, eventually, public) secondary schools to which Americans were to entrust the education of the leading citizens of the future. In the near term, Franklin's proposals met with only limited success; but the founding of Phillips Andover Academy in 1778 initiated a period of steadily growing enthusiasm for boarding-school academies whose curricula and vision of educational goals were in considerable measure shaped by the spirit of Franklin's suggestions.

As they followed Franklin's lead, Americans who spoke out about education became increasingly conscious that in advocating and designing formal schooling, they were shaping a new synthesis of Lockean and classical educational principles. Franklin's proposal for an academy includes among its curricular guidelines a strong recommendation to exploit the opportunity the audience of boys assembled together affords for education in the civic capacities of oratory and debate. The schoolroom should be the place where young future citizens and leaders learn the difference between sophistry and reasoned republican eloquence. But while reaching back to the Isocraean tradition, Franklin adds a new story to the classical edifice. The founder of American civic journalism emphasizes that perhaps the most important rhetoric in a modern republic is journalistic rhetoric: "Modern Political Oratory being chiefly performed by the Pen and Press, its Advantages over the Ancient in some Respects are to be shown" (4:104). The text Franklin recommends as a model for the new study of journalistic republican rhetoric is the *Spectator*. Franklin links to the study of rhetoric the public reading of political texts, and especially newspapers, and calls for the cultivation of a

vivid oral reading voice among the boys as a way of equipping future citizens with the power to bring to life and to disseminate the written word, in circles as small as the family and as large as public meetings in chapels or taverns:

For want of good Reading, Pieces publish'd with a view to influence the Minds of Men for their own or the publick Benefit, lose half their Force. Were there but one good Reader in a Neighbourhood, a publick Orator might be heard throughout a Nation with the same Advantages, and have the same Effect on his Audience, as if they stood within the reach of his Voice. (4:104)

Moreover, Franklin evidently means to have the envisaged academy encourage youngsters to enjoy and learn from participating in the give-and-take of public argument, especially in debates that intensify the drama of important contemporary occasions in the life of the community or the broader world, raising issues of political theory:

On *Historical Occasions*, Questions of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice, will naturally arise, and may be put to the Youth, which they may debate in Conversation and Writing. When they ardently desire Victory, for the Sake of the Praise attending it, they will begin to feel the Want, and be sensible of the use of *Logic*, or the Art of Reasoning to *discover* the Truth, and of *Arguing to defend it*, and *convince* Adversaries. This would be the time to acquaint them with the *Principles* of that Art. Grotius, Puffendorf, and some other Writers of the same Kind, may be used on these Occasions to decide their Disputes. Publick Disputes warm the Imagination, whet the Industry, and strengthen the natural Abilities. (3:413-15)

To some extent, it is true, American concern with formal schooling in the late eighteenth century builds on the peculiarly strong traditions of public schooling of the New England states, especially Massachusetts and Connecticut; but a closer look shows the very limited degree to which this is the case, at least as regards the spirit set in motion by Franklin. The cultivation of Puritan religious spirituality, as well as the cultivation of Quaker spirituality, which was more familiar in the existing schools of Philadelphia, ceases to be a goal of Franklin's educational scheme. This is not to say that the new academic notion entails the total expulsion of religion from schooling. But Franklin treats religion as a necessary supplement to, rather than the inspiration and guiding light of, morality. And the religion in question is what he calls "publick" or civil religion: that is, the minimal popular creed that history has shown to be essential for social health.

After the ratification of the Constitution and the enactment of the Bill of Rights, the question of whether the republic was to establish a system of public schooling took on a new urgency, in a few minds. Benjamin Rush and Noah Webster, following to some extent the trail blazed by Franklin,

2. *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1939-), 3:395-421 (*Proposals*) and 4:101-8 ("Idea"). Quotations in the pages that follow are from this edition of the two works.

tried to promote state-supported school curricula and textbooks that would marry a nonsectarian Protestant Christian public spirit with the ethos of self-government and commercial and agrarian enterprise that was the moral core of the new republic.

But no one devoted as much effort and thought to the attempt to establish public schools as Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson parted company with Rush and Webster inasmuch as he was disinclined to base civic spirit on what Franklin had called "public religion." Instead, Jefferson sought public schools and textbooks that would inculcate a new, purely secular, moral code of liberal, agrarian or yeoman, citizenship. A crucial ingredient of the Jeffersonian program was the notion that the government of the schools could be placed in local and parental hands. Jefferson hoped to exploit concern with educating children, male and female, resident within each local "ward," as he called his envisioned subdivisions, so as to draw the boys' and girls' "parents, guardians, or friends" out of their purely private economic and familial spheres. He hoped to plant a kernel from which a more generally active, participatory republican spirit could grow at the local level, leading to the creation of "wards" as the critical, subcounty units of government: "Begin them only for a single purpose," Jefferson confided to his comrade Joseph Cabell in a famous letter on the "wards" (February 2, 1816), "they will soon show for what others they are the best instruments." In other words, the Jeffersonian educational vision brought concern for early childhood civic education into an organic unity with concern for the civic education, through practice and habituation, of adults.³

It is indeed striking to compare our contemporary leaders' declarations of the goals and purposes of public education with Jefferson's most authoritative statement on the subject, his remarkably subtle Preamble to the 1779 Virginia Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge. The Preamble begins with a ringing appeal to the "natural rights" belonging to "individuals," protection of which is *the* purpose of, and criterion for, good government. But Jefferson moves at once to the need for popular education in political science, or knowledge of the "forms of government," especially through the study of history—not economic or social, but *political* history—and foreign affairs. This education is an education not simply of indi-

3. The letter to Cabell is quoted from *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Adrienne Koch and William Peden (New York: Random House, Modern Library, 1944), 662. The other quotations in this paragraph are from Jefferson's "Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge," in *Crisade against Ignorance: Thomas Jefferson on Education*, ed. Gordon C. Lee (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1961), 83-92. Quotations from the bill in the following pages are from this text.

viduals but of individuals united in "the people at large." It is the people who possess—but only as an educated community—the "natural powers" that can best safeguard against tyranny:

Whereas it appeareth that however certain forms of government are better calculated than others to protect individuals in the free exercise of their natural rights, and are at the same time themselves better guarded against degeneracy, yet experience hath shewn, that even under the best forms, those entrusted with power have, in time, and by slow operations, perverted it into tyranny; and it is believed that the most effectual means of preventing this would be, to illuminate, so far as practicable, the minds of the people at large, and more especially to give them knowledge of those facts, which history exhibiteth, that, possessed thereby of the experience of other ages and countries, they may be enabled to know ambition under all its shapes, and prompt to exert their natural powers to defeat its purposes.

But informed popular watchfulness by no means exhausts Jefferson's civic educational purpose. In the second half of the Preamble, he proceeds from the common education of all citizens to the uncommon "liberal education" of the rare few—especially among the poor—"whom nature hath endowed" with the superior intellectual and moral qualities that make them eligible to be entrusted with legislative and administrative responsibility in the representative form of government that marks the semi-aristocratic American regime:

And whereas it is generally true that the people will be happiest whose laws are best, and are best administered, and that laws will be wisely formed, and honestly administered, in proportion as those who form and administer them are wise and honest; whence it becomes expedient for promoting the publick happiness that those persons, whom nature hath endowed with genius and virtue, should be rendered by liberal education worthy to receive, and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens, and that they should be called to that charge without regard to wealth, birth, or other accidental condition or circumstance; but the indigence of the greater number disabling them from so educating, at their own expence, those of their children whom nature hath fitty formed and disposed to become useful instruments for the publick, it is better that such should be sought for and educated at the common expence of all, than that the happiness of all should be confided to the weak or wicked: be it therefore resolved [etc.]

Jefferson's civic educational theory is here adumbrated with impressive succinctness: natural rights belong to individuals, who can only secure those rights by being transformed, through education, into a "people" with the "natural powers" to protect themselves against oppression. But the people must hold those powers largely in reserve, since they must in practice "deposit" the protection of their rights and liberties in the hands of civic leaders

and administrators. These latter ought to be distinguished by a natural moral and intellectual superiority—a superiority that, however, requires a “liberal education” if it is to be realized.

Jefferson neither ignored nor underestimated the importance of vocational and technical education, or of giving, as he put it in his later Rockfish Gap Commission Report, “to every citizen the information he needs for the transaction of his own business; to enable him to calculate for himself, and to express and preserve his ideas, his contracts, and accounts, in writing.”⁴ But Jefferson always insisted on putting in the foreground or at the summit of declarations of educational goals the moral and civic dimension of education. As he went on to say in the Rockfish Gap Report, the higher goal is to enable the citizen to improve, by reading, his morals and faculties; to understand his duties to his neighbors and country, and to discharge with competence the functions confided to him by either; to know his rights; to exercise with order and justice those he retains, to choose with discretion the fiduciary of those he delegates; and to notice their conduct with diligence, with candor, and judgment; and, in general, to observe with intelligence and faithfulness all the social relations under which he shall be placed.

The specific civic spirit aimed at by Jefferson and other educational theorists among the founding generation involved, of course, both a passionate patriotism and a sense of fraternity or solidarity with fellow citizens in past and future generations, as well as the present one; but both the patriotism and the fraternity were of a new sort, deeply planted in the soil of personal and property rights of individuals. Love of country was to be love, not simply of the land and people and traditions, but love of the carefully articulated principles of political theory Americans drew from Locke and Montesquieu, mingled with reverence for the heroes who were most clearly dedicated to those specific principles. Care for one’s fellow citizens was to express, not so much selflessness or even self-transcendence, as the rational understanding that the rights of each depended on the rights of all. The heart of the matter is well expressed by Jefferson’s young disciple Samuel Harrison Smith, concluding his essay on education, which in 1795 shared with another Jefferson disciple, Samuel Knox, the prize of the American Philosophical Society:

The citizen, enlightened, will be a free man in its truest sense. He will know his rights, and he will understand the rights of others; discerning the connection of his interest with the preservation of those rights, he will as firmly support those of his

4. “Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Fix the Site of the University of Virginia,” in *Crusade against Ignorance*, 114–33; passages quoted are from p. 117.

fellow men as his own. Too well informed to be misled, too virtuous to be corrupted, we shall behold man consistent and inflexible. Not at one moment the child of patriotism, and at another the slave of despotism, we shall see him in principle forever the same.⁵

In the essay he published in 1787 supporting ratification of the Constitution, Noah Webster spoke with rather startling clarity about the degree to which the new American republic departed from traditional notions of civic solidarity and education:

Virtue, patriotism, or love of country, never was and never will be, till men’s natures are changed, a fixed, permanent principle and support of government. But in an agricultural country, a general possession of land . . . may be rendered perpetual, and the inequalities of commerce, are too fluctuating to endanger government. An equality of property, with a necessity of alienation, constantly operating to destroy combinations of powerful families, is the very soul of a republic . . . But while *property* is considered as the basis of the freedom of the American yeomanry, there are other auxiliary supports; among which is the *information of the people*. In no country is education so general—in no country, have the body of the people such a knowledge of the rights of man and of the principles of government. This knowledge, joined with a keen sense of liberty and a watchful jealousy, will guard our institutions.⁶

That Webster by no means intended to belittle the importance of patriotism in the context of an education centered on knowledge of rights, especially property rights, and politics rooted in such rights, is made clear in his later essay “On the Education of Youth in America.” “Every child in America,” he there says,

should be acquainted with his own country. . . . As soon as he opens his lips, he should rehearse the history of his own country; he should lip the praise of liberty and of those illustrious heroes and statesmen who have wrought a revolution in her favor. A selection of essays respecting the settlement and geography of America, the history of the late revolution and of the most remarkable characters and events that distinguished it, and a compendium of the principles of the federal and provincial governments should be the principal schoolbook in the United States. These are interesting objects to every man; they call home the minds of youth and fix them upon the interests of their own country, and they assist in forming attachments to it, as well as in enlarging the understanding.⁷

Webster adds further specificity to his curricular ideas when he speaks of the sort of knowledge that ought to be diffused in the American republic:

5. Samuel Harrison Smith, “Remarks on Education,” in Rudolph 1965, 220–21.

6. “An Examination into the Leading Principles of the Federal Constitution etc.,” in *Pamphlets on the Constitution of the United States Published during Its Discussion by the People, 1787–88*, ed. Paul Leicester Ford (Brooklyn: n.p., 1888), 57–58.

7. Quoted from Rudolph 1965, 64–65.

not only "a knowledge of spelling books and the New Testament," but "an acquaintance with ethics and the general principles of law, commerce, money, and government is necessary for the yeomanry of a republican state." The degree to which Lockean principles of individual rights are here being merged with and elevated by classical republican principles of education and citizenship becomes visible when Webster adds the reflection that "in Rome, it was the common exercise of boys at school to learn the laws of the twelve tables by heart, as they did their poets and classic authors. What an excellent practice this, in a free government!" This remark, like Webster's remark above on what ought to be the character of "the principal schoolbook in the United States" was far from a speculative utterance: he authored and published a series of such books that met with fantastic success. Selling literally millions of copies, and remaining for generations the core of American school curricula, these lively little books testified to the truth of Webster's prediction that political theory and history, along with moral theology, could be made memorably attractive to young future citizens.

Shining through the writings of those early Americans who reflected deeply on the nature of a modern republican civic education, there is discernible a special notion of popular self-respect. Those early American educational theorists held in their mind's eye the ideal of a widely diffused sense of dignity rooted in real independence of spirit as well as property, and real understanding of the moral and political principles that undergirded such spiritual and material independence. They hoped to cultivate a sense of self-respect, and a reverence for one's own rational laws and institutions, that would avoid both the childlike awe or adoration characteristic of paternalistic aristocracy and the vulgar incapacity for reverence, the mass self-congratulation, of populist democracy. "The people," John Adams wrote in a 1785 letter on civic education, "must be taught to reverence themselves, instead of adoring their servants, their generals, bishops, and statesmen." Reaching back, characteristically, to Plutarch's evocation of ancient republicanism for illustration, Adams added:

If Thebes owes its liberty and glory to Epaminondas, she will lose both when he dies, and it would have been as well if she had never enjoyed a taste of either. But if the knowledge, the principles, the virtues, and the capacities of the Theban nation produced an Epaminondas, her liberties and glory will remain when he is no more. And if an analogous system of education is established and enjoyed by the whole nation, it will produce a succession of Epaminondases.⁸

8. *The Works of John Adams*, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Little, Brown, 1850-56), 9:540.

The extraordinary difficulty, or delicacy, of the task becomes clearer when we see that what is sought is at one and the same time a self-consciously sovereign people, vigilant against governmental usurpation of liberty; and a people "inviolably respectful of lawful authority," as Washington put it in his first annual message to Congress, requesting (unsuccessfully, alas!) funding for public education. What is needed is a noncontradictory, but nonetheless paradoxical and difficult, combination of pride and humility.

The first American republicans spoke repeatedly of the significance of the education of women for the breeding of such popular sentiments. Both Locke and the classical republican philosophers had stressed the absolute importance of early childhood moral education, and hence the absolute importance of the education of mothers; and the Americans adopted this proposition. It was Noah Webster, again, who put the theme in its clearest light, in his essay "On the Education of Youth in America":

In a system of education that should embrace every part of the community the female sex claim no inconsiderable share of our attention. The women in America (to their honor it is mentioned) are not generally above the care of educating their own children. Their own education should therefore enable them to implant in the tender mind such sentiments of virtue, propriety, and dignity as are suited to the freedom of our governments. Children should be treated as children, but as children that are in a future time to be men and women. . . . In order to prevent every evil bias, the ladies, whose province it is to direct the inclinations of children on their first appearance and to choose their nurses, should be possessed, not only of amiable manners, but of just sentiments and enlarged understandings. (pp. 68-69)

But it is not only in the context of their fundamental role in shaping the characters of children that women's own education shows itself to be of awesome importance:

Their influence in controlling the manners of the nation is another powerful reason. Women, once abandoned, may be instrumental in corrupting society, but such is the delicacy of the sex and such the restraints which custom imposes upon them that they are generally the last to be corrupted. . . . A fondness for the company and conversation of ladies of character may be considered as a young man's best security against the attractiveness of a dissipated life. For this reason, society requires that females should be well educated and extend their influence as far as possible over the other sex. (p. 69)

From these observations, Webster moved to an insistence on the need for a reform of women's education with a view to developing in women a new sense of civic mission:

A distinction is to be made between a *good* education and a *showy* one, for an education, merely superficial, is a proof of corruption of taste and has a mischievous

influence on manners. The education of females, like that of males, should be adapted to the principles of the government and correspond with the stage of society. Education in Paris differs from that in Petersburg, and the education of females in London or Paris should not be a model for the Americans to copy. (pp. 69-70)

Webster further observed that this extensive new educational task could not safely be trusted to private resources, whether tutors or family, because those were too likely to be still imbued with the traditional notions of women's roles as viewed in an aristocratic or monarchic society. But Webster himself did not draw out the conclusions implied in these observations so fully or so clearly as did Benjamin Rush in his "Thoughts upon Female Education, Accommodated to the Present State of Society, Manners, and Government in the United States of America" (1787). Rush began from the observation that if mothers were to inspire a sense of dignity in a society where independence was grounded on competence in economic matters, and where most families required the close cooperation of husband and wife in managing family finances and property, then women must be educated so as to be competent in such matters. Accordingly, women were to study English; bookkeeping and arithmetic; geography; the history of the nation, including especially its struggle for freedom; and the principles of modern political theory. Some women at least were to gain "a general acquaintance with the first principles of astronomy and natural philosophy." While praising training in vocal music and especially preparation for church singing, and allowing training in dancing ("in our present state of society and knowledge, I conceive it to be an agreeable substitute for the ignoble pleasures of drinking and gaming"), Rush advised against expensive and time-consuming training in instrumental music. In the place of this aristocratic adornment, he sought to substitute the cultivation of a habit of serious reading: "How many useful ideas might be picked up in these hours from history, philosophy, poetry, and the numerous moral essays with which our language abounds . . .!"⁹

The attention of our young ladies should be directed as soon as they are prepared for it to the reading of history, travels, poetry, and moral essays. These studies are accommodated, in a peculiar manner, to the present state of society in America, and when a relish is excited for them in early life, they subdue that passion for reading novels which so generally prevails among the fair sex. I cannot dismiss this species of writing and reading without observing that the subjects of novels are by no means accommodated to our present manners. They hold up *life*, it is true, but it is not yet *life* in America.

9. These and the following quotations are from the text in Rudolph 1965, 27-32.

"It will be necessary," Rush concludes, to "connect all these branches of education with regular instruction in the Christian religion." For Rush opposes many of his contemporaries in insisting on the need for a common religion as a common foundation for morality; and in this regard women have a uniquely important role to play, given that "the female breast is the natural soil of Christianity." The reading and study of the Bible is "improperly banished from our schools," and most improperly of all from schools for girls.

Benjamin Rush's vision and views found their most powerful advocate in a woman born the year that he delivered the address later published as "Thoughts upon Female Education": the great Emma Willard, to whom American education, and the distinctively American tradition of teachers' education, owes so much. In 1819 Willard presented a long-meditated and well-honed proposal for the creation of a system of state-supported seminars for women to the governor of New York for transmission to the legislature. In essence, the "Address to the Public, Particularly to the Members of the Legislature of New York, Proposing a Plan for Improving Female Education," drew together the arguments of Rush, Webster, and others, and took them one further crucial step. For Willard argued that the education begun in the home by mothers educated in state seminaries must continue in state-established primary schools; and in these primary schools the most apt and available teachers would be women, not men. In other words, Willard spearheaded what was to become the most striking new feature of school education, a feature almost completely unforeseen by Americans in the founding period: the transformation of the educational profession, particularly in the primary grades, by the overwhelming predominance of women as teachers—as moral teachers and exemplars. When Willard's petition and proposal failed, she went on (in 1821) to establish the Troy Female Seminary, the first permanent collegiate-level school for women in the United States: an institution that pioneered, with enormous success, the unprecedented notion of educating women for a learned profession—to wit, teaching.

Emma Willard thus contributed perhaps more than did any other American of her time to the amelioration of the gravest practical problem recognized and lamented by almost all those who wrote about the future of schooling in the country: the shortage of dedicated, exemplary professional teachers, caused by the low salaries and limited esteem accorded men who entered the profession.

Still, the curricular substance of Willard's educational vision, like that

of the earlier Founders from whom she drew inspiration, met with only very partial success. This guiding conception of school education, following Franklin in uniting Lockean and classical principles in an uneasy, but coherent, synthesis, was largely discarded, and at a rather early point in the development of America's political culture. But perhaps the time has come for a careful reconsideration of the possibility of resuscitating the goal of their educational proposals, and even the applicable parts of the curricular means they suggested. To be sure, changes reflecting the transformations that have occurred in American society would be required. America no longer exhibits even the degree of religious consensus that Rush believed he had to work with; and the rural and landowning backbone of the yeoman society Jefferson and Webster looked to has disappeared. But as the recent words of President Bush's State of the Union Address indicate, the nation still recognizes the need to communicate to our children a reverence for the past that incorporates us into a society whose freedom is more than the freedom of individuals hermetically sealed into the personal sphere, the present time, the immediate place. There still lives a heritage of civic virtues, virtues of gratitude and of generosity, of struggle at home and abroad, of sacrifice for freedom rather than mere enjoyment of freedom, of faith in the one God whose oneness inspires and helps weld our oneness as a nation. And there still lives the confidence that these virtues can be taught, in part through "telling the story." May it not be time to make a more deliberate and determined effort to make this telling—and, in addition, practices or habits reflecting what has been told—a central part of the curriculum of our public schools?

To this kind of suggestion I foresee a powerful objection, coming especially from thoughtful conservatives. What reason is there to suppose that we can entrust so important a task to the teachers of today—whose spirits have been formed in substantial part by a higher education many of whose guiding lights are anything but sympathetic to this kind of rootedness in, and reverence for, republican tradition, patriotism, piety, property rights, and family? Will not the effectual upshot be just more subtle indoctrination in the corrosive intellectual and moral fashions that pervade the academic elite and seep thence through every college classroom? Will not moral education be conveyed through "values clarification," with its hidden agenda of apparent skepticism, actual relativism, and hidden, only semiconscious, but all the more dogmatic, radical egalitarianism and individualism? Will not history be taught in such a way as to debunk or even defame the Founders, and all subsequent leaders who did not rebel against the American tradition

as a racist, capitalist, sexist, Eurocentric conspiracy to dominate and exploit the "forgotten of history"? Will private enterprise, will the rootedness of human dignity in private property that has so indelibly marked the American republican tradition, be treated with anything like the respect it deserves? Will not every American war and war hero or ordinary soldier be treated as the veterans of the Vietnam War have generally been treated—pined, where they are not contemned, their military achievements forgotten, where they are not excoriated? Will not the religious traditions of America be treated as the last gasps of benighted ages and darkened minds? Will the American family and American womanhood be celebrated for the hard and self-abnegating choices they made as they bowed to the stern laws of nature and the harsh edicts of destiny—or will their strength in adversity be seen as the stubbornness of "false consciousness under oppression"? In how many advocates of contemporary feminism do the principles and commitments of a feminist like Emma Willard still live?

I cannot offer reassuring answers to these questions. But I think Aristotle is correct in insisting that private and familial moral or religious education lacks the authority to sustain itself without direct public reinforcement: I do not think we can leave things where they are and expect them not to get worse. As is evident even from such superficial indicators as opinion polls, the mass of the American citizenry, and especially those who choose the burdens of parenthood, seem more sensible, more responsible, and wiser in civic matters than the elites who dominate the universities; and teachers in the public schools, since they tend to live among ordinary folk and only spend a few years under the direct tutelage of the higher education establishment, remain somewhere in between. On the whole, I am inclined to think reasonable the hope that primary and secondary schoolteachers are not as alienated from the educational principles I have sketched as is sometimes suggested by the pronouncements of their "spokespeople." At the very least, I think we have to hope that men and women who devote their lives to teaching will be willing to listen to and reflect upon calls for a return to our civic educational heritage, enlarged and enriched by a new infusion of classical republican inspiration.

But the universities, I must concede, are as Hobbes suggested the fountainheads of opinion in an enlightened society such as ours, where ideas and scientific learning, or the claim of scientific learning, wield such authority. Besides, to say that the people are less corrupt than the academic elite is not to say that the people are uncorrupt. And what is peculiar to our elite corruption (as Tocqueville, again, so presciently predicted) is that it consists

in large part of flattery of "the people," or of democracy and egalitarianism, as well as individualism. This flattery works, although not as well as its disappointed purveyors expect. It works slowly, because the people in their lack of sophistication remain impressed by important traditional sources of contempt for the people or for populism—especially for the people and their judgment when they judge en masse. The people tend not wholly to trust those in government, partly because the people elect those in government and know something about how one gets elected in a mass democracy in which ancient traditions of republican and biblical virtue have worn thin. On the other hand, the people tend to trust professors, partly because they still think learning is linked (as indeed it ought to be, and still is in a minority) to moral sobriety and civic wisdom, and partly because they do not select professors and have no idea how they are selected. The people are all the more susceptible to the claims of authority advanced by the professors, especially since those claims present themselves as "progressive" and "anti-elitist," while promising "liberation" from onerous, old-fashioned demands or duties of family, country, God, nature, and the truth.

From these reflections I draw a practical, if perhaps somewhat disheartening, conclusion: the reform most needed as regards the spirit of education is the reform of the spirit of higher education, since it is higher education, or the practitioners of higher education, whose outlook is likely to come to dominate in the long run.

10 / Against Canons and Canonicity: Dialectic as the Heart of Higher Education

In turning to higher education, we are brought face to face with the full complexity and challenge of the idea of liberal education. For while higher education is indeed important as a continuation of, and source of teachers for, the liberal civic education that ought to begin at the lower levels, higher education as we know it in the modern university has other and more direct functions and goals. At its "highest," higher education aims at liberal education in a second sense, a sense that encompasses, but goes beyond, citizenship education. But just what this transcivic goal of higher education might be has become increasingly difficult to articulate in contemporary America. The problem is not simply the steady pressure on the universities to provide very sophisticated vocational preparation and technical scientific expertise. This pressure, after all, is inevitable and by no means altogether improper in the context of modern democracy. We need highly skilled lawyers, engineers, doctors, social workers, and technicians and scientists of all kinds. But to keep the pursuit of technical expertise within its proper bounds, there is required a counterpressure exerted by a reasonably clear articulation of the hierarchy of goals in the modern university. This articulation is the responsibility, above all, of the "humanities," including the more "humane" branches of the social sciences. Unfortunately, however, among the custodians of the humanities in today's universities there reigns profound confusion or despair regarding the very possibility of articulating a clear conception of "humanity" in its most "liberal" or liberated spiritual fulfillment. I suggest we try to recover our bearings by returning, again, to the original, Socratic