

## ***LIBERAL EDUCATION IN THE AGE OF I***

**Pano Kanelos**

Conventional wisdom holds that we live in a fragmented age. We are by this account divided into tribes, affinity groups, persuasions and identities. We have political parties that appear to be consolidated around binary ideologies. We are separated by our tastes, our proclivities, even our skin. We form clans that eye each other across an apocalyptic landscape.

I would contest this narrative.

We do not live in the Age of Fragmentation, but in the Age of Isolation. We live in the Age of I. Our clannish affiliations are just egos in close proximity to one another, huddled together, each seeking their own ends for their own purposes. In a time of infinite choice, we have embraced atomic individuality.

When Protagoras declared that man is the measure of all things, asserting a radical form of relativism, Plato called him out as a sophist, as one making the weaker argument appear the stronger. There are ideas and ideals outside the self – truth, beauty, virtue – to which man is subject, Plato insisted. To suggest otherwise is to put the desire for power, that is, the desire to live according to our own will, above the desire for truth. For two millennia, Plato’s case appeared solid. That consensus no longer holds.

The Age of I is not just Protagorean, insisting that man is the measure of all things, but Protean. Proteus, in Greek mythology, was the son of Poseidon; having characteristics of the ever-changing sea, of the fluidity of water, he was a shape-shifter, altering his form to suit circumstance. To be Protean is to be mutable, versatile, to be able to transform oneself at will. The theoretical term for this is “self-fashioning,” coined by the scholar of Renaissance literature, Stephen Greenblatt. Greenblatt claimed that at the heart of modern identity is the impulse to construct one’s identity and public persona.

When we refer to our current moment as “liquid modernity,” what we really mean is that our times are defined by a Protean fluidity of the self. Relations between individuals are conducted upon the matrices of power. At play is the assertion of raw will.

How did we get here? How did we come to construe the world as a zero-sum competition? Three writers on the threshold of the modern world might help us to address these questions: John Donne, Thomas Hobbes and William Shakespeare.

As John Donne, the great seventeenth-century metaphysical poet, recognized in the “Anatomy of the World,” writing at the advent of what we call Modernity, to fashion oneself according to one’s impulses and desires, one must overturn all orthodoxies; this unbridled individualism, his poem contends, fractures the bonds of custom and habit that bind us together:

'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone,

All just supply, and all relation;

Prince, subject, father, son, are things forgot,

For every man alone thinks he hath got

To be a phoenix, and that there can be

None of that kind, of which he is, but he.

The mythological phoenix is an apt symbol for the individual in the Age of I. According to legend, only one Phoenix bird could inhabit the earth at a time, burning brightly for a thousand years, until consumed by its own flames. The glory of the Phoenix was its singularity and radical independence. The Phoenix is the “I am” that brooks no other I’s.

A progenitor of modern political philosophy and contemporary of Donne, Thomas Hobbes, envisioned the modern world as a world of Phoenixes. In the Hobbesian state of nature, human beings are fully autonomous creatures, seeking to fulfil their appetites, while avoiding those things that cause displeasure or harm. We are like balls on a billiards table, propelled towards what we desire, until something or someone crosses our paths and sends us careening away from our intended goal. And as far as determining our goals, that is determining what it is that we ought to seek, Hobbes returns to the radical relativism of Protagoras; Hobbes writes, “For men measure, not only other men, but all other things, by themselves.” There are no higher order values, no transcendent ideals, no right or wrong; Hobbes insists that we are directed simply by our will: “private Appetite” he contends, “is the measure of Good, and Evil.”

To understand what this means for human relationships, we must attend to what Hobbes says about love: “That which men Desire, they are also said to LOVE; and to HATE those things, for which they have Aversion. So that Desire, and Love, are the same thing.” Love, for Hobbes is not a disposition towards another that leads us to selflessness. It is simply a projection of our selfishness. We love that which gives us pleasure and hate that which does not. Desire and love are identical, Hobbes asserts. This kind of love, which reflects the ego back upon itself, is the love of Narcissus, who, bending over a pool of water, is enraptured by his own image.

In the Age of I, we retreat within the carapace of the constructed self. We gaze out from behind our self-fashioned shells. We venture forth only tentatively. The arena of human relationships has become something like the no-man’s land between the trenches in the battles of the Great War. To venture out is to be exposed to risk and peril. We have thus become bunkered selves. We turn to pornography to find carnal gratification. We have Amazon deliver our necessities. We use Facebook to project a curated version of ourselves into the world.

The Age of I has a tragic cast. Perhaps another early modern, William Shakespeare, can help us to understand the nature and scope of this tragedy.

Listen to the titles of Shakespeare’s comedies: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, *Loves’ Labours Lost*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Winter’s Tale*, *The Tempest*.

Now listen to the titles of his tragedies: *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*.

The difference is readily evident and striking: Shakespeare’s tragic universe is centred resolutely on individuals. Each tragedy is named for a single character or a pair of lovers, whereas the comedies refer to general states, events, or social conditions. What does this focus portend?

Shakespearean comedies begin with trouble and end in peace. At the start of each, social relationships fray and fracture: fathers reject their daughters’ object of love, brothers quarrel over inheritance, friends compete for the attention of the same woman, false accusations of infidelity split husband and wife. Yet by the end of each play, the social fabric is repaired, as friends, fathers, daughters, sisters, brothers, husbands and wives are reconciled. Harmony is restored. The force that engenders this

renewal is love. The symbols of reconciliation in Shakespeare's comedies are the dances, celebrations and marriages that conclude each of these plays. In the comic world, selfishness gives way to selflessness, and the sundered world is made whole again.

Tragedy moves in the other direction. Plays such as *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *Hamlet* begin with moments of celebration – military victories or marriages. Yet they deteriorate as the protagonist of each play becomes increasingly isolated, wilful, and blind. Shakespeare's tragic vision centres on extraordinary individuals who insist on shaping the world to suit their own desires. The very traits that make these men and women so remarkably distinct – their courage, their passion, their ambition – are too abundant, too difficult to reconcile with the social order. Love is nullified in these plays, and even in those that centre on romantic relationships, *Romeo and Juliet* or *Antony and Cleopatra*, turn love itself into a source of isolation by turning it into a form of self-love. These plays end invariably in death.

This points towards what is tragic about the Age of I – not that we are fractured, split off from one another, isolated, but rather that this is a condition that we bring about of our own accord. We are not hapless victims of technology or history or social constructs. Yet as we find ourselves at liberty to pursue our own ends, we are increasingly subject to angst and ennui. As Hamlet, the avatar of the modern conscience, declaims, "I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams." The echo we hear in that chamber where we find ourselves speaking onto ourselves repeats a singular question: with our superfluity of freedom, have we been unchained or become unmoored?

In the age of the liberated self, what is the purpose or promise of liberal education? What I mean by liberal education is that tradition of education grounded in the *artes liberales*, the arts of freedom, which was the dominant form of advanced education in the West until the advent of a competing model in the nineteenth century, the research university. As its name implies, liberal education, or liberal arts education, has as its focus human liberty. Of course, there may well be no more contested term than that of "liberty." And what one holds liberty to be defines what one thinks about being human. So, our question is not a simple one.

But let's begin not with liberal, or liberty, but with the idea of education itself. What is an education? The term itself comes from the Latin, *ex ducere*, "to lead out of." Out of what, we may ask? The general sense is to lead one out of ignorance. There are two agents involved in education. There is the one who leads and the one who is led. The first we call a teacher, the second, a student. This may seem elementary, but it is important for us to recognize that education is not a solo endeavour. That does not mean in some cases it might not be carried out alone. There are a good number of people who have been led out of ignorance by simply making their own way through a stack of books. But they are not really alone. Their interlocutors, though absent in person, are present on the pages. Books are the manifestation of minds, and the means of conversations carried out across generations, across the transitory boundaries of time and place.

An education is in one sense a form of transmission. It is a passing on of knowledge, the way an electrical current passes from object to object. We are in this world for a brief time. It is unreasonable for each of us to discover everything that needs to be known anew for ourselves. We depend upon others to fill in the details. Teachers in this sense are conduits.

But education is also more than that, more than simply a filling in. It is a means of shaping, a means of formation. What we learn, and how we learn it, determines, to an extent, who we become. Liberal education, therefore, announces its purpose as being related to liberty. Again, how one conceives of liberty will determine what one perceives the ends of liberal education to be. Is it the education *appropriate* to free people? Is it an education that *produces* free people? Is it something more

complex? In order to think through these questions, I would like to take a turn in the other direction and think about what liberal education is not, or at least, ought not to be.

There are two tendencies in modern education, I would contend, that undermine, perhaps even endanger, our freedom. A truly liberal education must navigate between the Scylla of utility and the Charybdis of ideology.

On the one side, we seem now to reduce education at all levels to a matter of utility. We focus on the acquisition of useful skills. These skills are generally ones attuned to success in the marketplace. If we are being formed, it is primarily into units of production. Of course, preparation for a working life is necessary. Yet how we find the means to live ought not to determine who we are; rather, determining who we are, ought to determine how we live. As **WEB DuBois explained, "The true college will ever have but one goal – not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes."** Defining ourselves primarily or exclusively as working beings does not enhance our freedom, it constrains our horizons. Alongside the acquisition of useful knowledge, we must ask questions of value and purpose and meaning.

On the other side, is education inflected by ideology. This may be even more pernicious. Ideology presents a totalizing perspective, and in the case of education, conducted by those who are expert in narrow fields of knowledge, yet who often seek to frame their work within a larger, unfolding narrative, answers precede questions. We might think of the adage of Archilocus: "A fox knows many things, but a hedgehog one important thing." The developing mind of a student ought to have fox-like freedom to range impulsively and impetuously. Yet too often, we experts, hedgehogs that we have become, constrain that freedom by imposing what we are sure we know to be true, not simply about our fields of expertise, but about the world at large; this may appear to be education, but it is not liberal. And its effect is to deaden, rather than quicken, the minds of those in our charge.

How does liberal education countermand these tendencies?

It has always been commonplace to claim that the purpose of liberal education is to free the individual, "liberal" coming from the Latin, *liber*, to be free. Of course, what is not commonly agreed upon is what the individual is meant to be freed *from*. In the ancient world, liberal education was the education of the free man -- that is, one who was not bound to labour and could therefore spend time cultivating one's mind. Leisure was the precondition of such an education; in fact our word, school, comes from the Greek for leisure, *schole*. This still lingers in the notion of the undergraduate years as a sort of Arcadia, a time and place set apart from quotidian concerns. Another claim made upon liberal education is that it frees one from prejudice. Human beings are encased within a cocoon of pre-spun ideas, opinions and preferences. Liberal education splices open that cocoon. We emerge into the world in an altered state, transformed, capable of flight. Others hold that to be liberally educated is to be freed from illusions. Our movement is from the cave of shadows into the searing day. This model promises illumination. I would argue that above and beyond these forms of liberation, the telos of liberal education is to free us from *ourselves*. Our work is primarily internal. We are bound tightly by our pride. It constrains us. It isolates us. It distorts our relationships with others, with the world, and with what is true. The first order of business in a liberal education is to chasten.

Liberal education has at its operative function, the posing of questions. It teaches us to measure, to evaluate, to critique, to determine, to hypothesize, to test, to query. It takes as its subject all things that human beings might come to know. In some cases, there are answers available, and, once uncovered, these answers are definitive – the square root of sixteen is and always will be four. In others, we have a steady chance of finding a reasonable answer – for example, what effect might quantitative easing have on federal fiscal policy? In others, there may be a consensus that gives

credibility to an opinion – the death of Cordelia at in Act Five of *King Lear* is heart-breakingly tragic. Still others will be perpetually contested – the claim, for example, that beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

What is particular about the liberal arts tradition is that all these forms of questioning and lines of inquiry are taken to be interrelated. There is no such thing as a liberal “art.” There are rather many fields of knowledge, each with its own horizons. Yet those horizons overlap, so that exercising one’s rational faculty in one area, ripples across others. As a sort of crude example, let us think about how we exercise the human body. We have developed techniques to strengthen concentrated groups of muscles – our quadriceps or our triceps. When we are pulling a rope, we may be using some of our muscles most directly, but our entire musculature is engaged, from head to toe, as we form one tensile unit of force. And when we turn our body towards another task – hiking a steep incline – the effort of our muscles is redistributed, but strength in one area contributes to the efficacy of the whole. Thus in liberal education, our effort to grasp Euclidean proofs, to read a score from Haydn, to unpack the rhetorical tropes of the Gettysburg Address are not efforts to master mathematics, or music, or statesmanship, but rather to develop the whole person towards the end of human flourishing. In the same way that a strong and healthy human body allows greater freedom of movement and action, so too does a strong and healthy human mind extend the scope and range of liberty.

The liberal arts tradition emerged in the hothouse of rational inquiry and disputation that was ancient Greece. The hunger to know the world, and the belief that the mind was the prism through which the world might come to be known, inspired a frenzy of ratiocination. Underneath it all was an abiding faith in *logos*, that the universe was rationally ordered, and that as rational beings, possessed of *logos*, we have the capacity to apprehend that order. Thus, nothing ought to remain unknown to us. In fact, we were designed as knowing beings, and therefore could only flourish insofar as we pursued knowledge as widely and deeply as possible. The audacity of this project is perhaps best exemplified by Aristotle. Scanning the titles of Aristotle’s corpus, we get a sense of just how comprehensive his aspirations were: *The Physics*, *Meteorology*, *The Politics*, *On the Soul*, *On the Motion of Animals*, *the Nicomachean Ethics*, *The Poetics*, *Metaphysics*, *On Memory and Recollection*, *Rhetoric*, *On Dreams*, *On Divination by Dreams*, and so forth. Aristotle was a serial classifier and catalogue; his impulse was towards the encyclopaedic.

While Aristotle established the scope of liberal education, Plato more frequently addressed its ends. “The object of education,” he contends, “is to teach us to love beauty.” This, we will recognize immediately, is a very different sort of claim than Aristotle might make. Yet it was no facile contention for Plato. By beauty, Plato meant, I think, something on the order of Keats’ concluding line in “Ode on a Grecian Urn”: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty; that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” Had we time enough, we might want to look at Keats’ qualification, “on earth.” Is truth, like earthly beauty, transient? Or is it transcendent? But we can see from Plato’s formulation, setting beauty as the passionate object of education, as the beloved, that he is generating questions that are qualitative rather than quantitative, that push us towards a garden of forking paths, rather than a neatly constructed geometrical proof.

It is too gross an exaggeration to say that Aristotle stood for cool reason, while Plato aimed for the ineffable. But it is helpful to think of each as leaning in one direction, Aristotle towards the concrete, Plato towards the abstract; Aristotle towards the measurable, Plato towards the infinite; Aristotle towards definition, Plato towards interpretation; Aristotle towards examination of phenomena, Plato towards scrutiny of the multivalent self.

Aristotle’s mode was the lecture, his voice the voice of authority. Plato’s mode the dialogue, the arena of conversation, by nature poly-vocal. Where Aristotle worked with outlines and bullet points, Plato

used allegory and myth. Yet Aristotle and Plato do not represent binary approaches to knowledge. “Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom,” declares one of the philosophers. “Philosophy begins in wonder,” asserts the other. Both of these are claims that either would have readily made.

There are, broadly speaking, two ways of knowing the world, both of which are necessary, yet ultimately irreconcilable. What we know can be divided into two categories – that which we can measure, and that which we cannot. On the one hand, human life is finite, bounded, defined by ridges and borders. On the other, we touch the infinite. Because we are more than mechanical, because we each have a mysterious sort of agency, our lives are imbued with the qualities of better and worse. We make choices and try to do so with the best information possible.

This is reflected in the liberal arts, divided historically into the trivium and the quadrivium. The first set of disciplines encompasses the qualitative aspects of human experience: speech, expression, discernment. The latter, the aspects of the world that we can measure – time, distance, breadth, number. Our work as seekers of truth is to hold all these forms of knowing in our minds simultaneously and to craft a synthesis that reconciles the whole. None of us is capable of such a project– we see through the glass, darkly – but were we able to achieve this synthesis, we would approach that ever-elusive quality called wisdom.

The primary qualities of a liberal education, therefore, are three:

First, it must be expansive. It must train the mind to range across the broadest array of subjects. These subjects should be ones that raise the most fundamental matters. They should begin with foundational questions – What is a point? What is justice? – and radiate outward. Eventually, many of the answers will intersect, expanding networks of meaning exponentially.

Second, liberal education must prepare us to make both quantitative and qualitative judgments. Certain types of inquiry involve calculation, measurement, or experiment. Others require judiciousness, perspicacity, or prudence. We must know where the boundaries between these modes lie; yet we must also not seal these realms off from one another.

Third, and this is deduced from the first two, liberal education compels us to seek outside of ourselves for sources of knowledge. It recognizes that while we each possess reason, as individuals we can only ever possess fragments of truth. Moreover, we inhabit mostly the realm of opinions, which are shaded by our desires and aversions. Therefore, we are obligated to turn to others to test our ideas and to check our opinions. The arena for this exchange is dialogue, the sharing of ideas with others.

When we engage in dialogue, we are not simply speaking to one another – we are exercising our faculty of reason as we search out the lineaments of truth. And in these moments, we are both *inquiring into* logos, attempting to scry the order of things, and *agents* of logos, the means through which truth reveals itself. This, I would assert, is the most profound promise of dialogue.

Dialogue, if it is to be fertile, requires intellectual humility, the recognition of the dignity of all participants, and a passion for truth.

Intellectual humility is the starting point of reasoned discourse. Our lives are brief, and we make our way as best we can. Yet we are buffeted by fear, desire, will, circumstance, and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to. The knowledge that we pick up along the way comes to us in teaspoonfuls. It is necessary to hold opinions to make our way through life, but we ought to hold them gingerly.

As we try to come to seek the truth about things in the company of others, it is imperative that we recognize that we are all fellow travellers. We are each equally dignified by our capacity for reason. Our dialogue must be attended by respect, patience, and fair-mindedness. From these will emerge trust, which in turn will elevate our discourse.

The passion for truth is in the end what must animate our project. Intellectual humility may nudge us away from ignorance, but truth must be our lodestar, that towards which we are drawn. In the pursuit of truth, we must be scrupulous, fearless and persistent. In fact, the gap between ignorance and knowledge, suspended between intellectual modesty and the hunger for truth, is where we join our exemplar, Socrates.

The Socratic paradox – that we come to know ourselves best through conversation with others is at the heart of liberal education. The word dialogue has two roots – “dia” and “logos”. Logos is a complex term, indicating both reason and language. It might be best to think of logos as a double-helix, where reason is entwined with language and language with reason. “Dia”, affixed to logos, indicates a further sort of entwining, one in which the operation of reason through language is manifest in conversation. “Dia” means not only “two”, but “through,” and this brings us to the Socratic paradox – we come to know *ourselves* best through conversation with *others*.

Self-knowledge is the predicate of freedom. We are only truly free if we come to know ourselves. Liberal education frees us to do so by ensuring that we seek knowledge outside ourselves and in the company of others. In contrast, both Protagoras and Proteus present a kind of slavery, in the guise of a liberated self. Protagoras’s claim that man is the measure of all things is a distortion – while man may measure all things, the individual is emphatically not the measure *of* all things. And the promise of Proteus, that we can shift shapes endlessly, according to our appetite and will, denies the very self it seeks to serve, by leaving no stable point, no centre. Hamlet, as we have noted, expresses the angst of the self in the Age of I: “I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.” He would be a Phoenix, solitary and self-governing, yet something intrudes upon his isolation; his desire to live in soliloquy, as a solo voice speaking onto itself, is neither sustained nor sustainable. There is another Hamlet in the play, a revenant, a dream, who draws the Prince into dialogue. The ghost, his father, reminds him that he lives within a network of tradition and obligation, which binds him to take account of and take action for others: “Remember me, Hamlet!” the Ghost exhorts. To which Hamlet responds: “Aye, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat in this distracted globe.” The I and the thou elide, as Hamlet comes to know who he is and what he must do. When he forgets the Ghost’s injunction, when he returns to acting only for his own ends, the play reaches its tragic conclusion.

Liberal education does not constitute our freedom, but rather gives us the capacity and context to reflect upon liberty, as we have just done in the case of Hamlet and over the past three-quarters of an hour. The questions about who we are, how we ought to be, and what role education plays in ascertaining and securing our liberty, are fundamental human questions, and qualitative ones. Seeking answers to these questions is how we exercise our freedom. As Frederick Douglass insisted, “Knowledge makes a man unfit to be a slave.” All forms of slavery are pernicious. The most potent one of all is ignorance of our own nature. Freeing us from this state is assuredly the aim of liberal education.

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*Note: Portions of this speech have previously been delivered in public*