

JEDER MENSCH BRAUCHT  
FREIHEIT, UM SEINE  
ANLAGEN UND FÄHIGKEITEN  
ENTFALTEN UND  
VERWIRKLICHEN ZU KÖNNEN.  
DIE WIRTSCHAFT ERBLÜHT,  
WENN SICH JEDER FREI  
VERFALLEN KULTUR UND  
WISSENSCHAFTEN, STAGNIERT  
DIE WIRTSCHAFT.  
GEISTIGES LEBEN BRAUCHT  
FREIHEIT GENAUSO, WIE DER  
KÖRPER DIE LUFT ZUM ATMEN.

## Liberales Institut

Kenneth Minogue

# Education and the Free Society

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# Education and the Free Society

Kenneth Minogue

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*I propose in these remarks to relate education to freedom by pointing to three basic experiences in the history of education and by drawing some conclusions from them. I start, of course, from the premise that without freedom, no education is possible. And let me define „education“, somewhat brutally, as the activity of sustaining, extending and transmitting the culture of a civilisation. These three activities, of course, cannot be clearly distinguished: each involves the other.*

The first moral and social philosopher was Socrates, who drew on a tradition that owed much to earlier thinkers, called, significantly „pre-Socratics.“ Socrates promoted a bracing scepticism about both gods and majorities, and the Athenian democracy put him to death for it in 399 BC. Those early dialogues in which Plato represented Socrates are in themselves an excellent education in the logic of inquiry. In particular, Socrates insisted on demanding clarity about the object of discussion as the precondition for advancing understanding. In Socratic thought, philosophy consisted in a critical examination of the ideas we all use in making sense of the world we live in. It was a crucial element in this inquiry that we ought not to be impressed by the fact that everybody accepts the belief being examined. Truth was not a matter of counting votes. The enormous significance of Socrates is that his life and his teaching united to make him not only an exemplar but virtually a martyr in the cause of knowledge. His submission to the verdict of the Athenian people (rather than taking the opportunity to run away from Athens) was itself based on a point of logic – namely, that the very life one leads implies a principle of conduct. To belong entails submitting to the law.

In the Socratic image of education, the philosopher stands apart from both the state and society, and represents a critical tradition that may well find itself in conflict with the „conventional wisdom.“ The philosopher, as the lover of wisdom, is a creature of questions rather than answers. And that means that his use to practical men – to rulers in particular – is marginal. Practical men have urgent problems to which some sort of answer must be found, and soon. The philosopher, by contrast, is in no hurry to arrive at a conclusion, and if he does, he soon finds that conclusions generate as many problems as they solve. The conclusion I draw is that the philosopher will always find himself in opposition to the practical man, and that education must keep its distance from chancelleries. Indeed, philosophers may not merely be useless in practice; they may actually be dangerous if they undermine the convictions on which the city is based.

Education, then, may well be at odds with conventional opinion, but it is far from true that mere oppositionality is a sign of philosophical thought. In any society (especially in modern times) governments will find themselves opposed by

many ideas and practices; some of these may be educational, but many will not. The terrorist and the criminal – not to mention the student militants of the 1960s – were all oppositional, but they certainly were not concerned with that „disinterested pursuit of truth“ that has classically been cultivated in universities. I find it easy to understand why many academics, especially philosophers, have argued that universities are essentially *critical* institutions, but this is an idea that must be treated with caution. For one thing, any transposition of a living tradition into an abstract idea will be inadequate to it. For another, every dogma is critical of something, but rejection is not the same as criticism. As against this identification of the academic in terms of an essence, I should prefer to advance my central theme, which is that education is essentially in conflict with *practice*.

Let me now move to my second basic experience: the founding of European universities in the course of the twelfth century. The marvellous thing about these associations was that they seem to have emerged spontaneously from a passion to explore ideas based upon classical and Christian texts. The first teachers whose work developed into what came to be called the *studia generalia* of the middle ages were of course Christians, but they were Christians many of whom thought that their religion needed the bracing clarifications of dialectic. An accretion of merely received ideas had left Christianity in a condition of incoherence. Here education was needed as a kind of hygienic resuscitation of otherwise confused doctrine. Further, they wanted to understand better what their faith revealed about the world, and this involved them in the same kind of philosophical inquiry as Socrates had initiated. What did the words of their creed actually mean? And in pursuing this theme, one of the resources available to them was the literature of Greece and Rome whose high prestige made all the more teasing the fact that it assumed both a religion and a way of life quite different from the realities of the life around them. Before long, the Scholastics were launched on dangerous ideas about the reality of universals, ideas that made the custodians of orthodoxy uneasy. Authority took rapid steps to bring this new movement into the established fold. Corporations of teachers who had come together *ex consuetudine* – by custom – were rapidly assimilated to Papal or Imperial decree. Universities required Papal or Imperial charter – but the reality was that the flowering of culture in these times was part of the new explosion of associative tendencies possible in a society of individuals governed by the rule of law. It is the beginnings of what later came to be called „civil society.“

The essence of civil society is that it arises spontaneously *within* a framework of law, but independently of the purposes of civil authority. The cultivation and transmission of knowledge by these enthusiastic teachers was able to exploit the

autonomy a Christian civilisation gives to religious activity, and it benefited from the alms-giving propensities of the pious of those days. Colleges could thus become well-endowed institutions largely able to govern themselves without serious interference from civil authority. Further, being (so to speak) international organisations, they were in some degree independent of authorities. (The *generale in studium generale* signified open to all comers.)

Some will object to my argument that my rather Ivory Tower view of universities fails to recognise the fact that these new institutions served the practical needs of society at a time when both the Church and the towns were demanding clerks capable of administering ever more complex activities. No doubt this is true – some response to practical needs is hard to avoid – but the vital thing is that universities as they emerged developed their own highly distinctive character and purposes, things which distinguished them from mere training colleges for practical needs.

Others may well object that growing up *within* the context of religion, mediaeval universities were shackled by orthodoxy and lacked the freedom to follow the argument wherever it might lead. Many modern scholars recognise a basic conflict between the university and the Church, whose doctrines have often functioned oppressively. It is certainly true that scholars of that time needed to keep a wary eye on the problem of heresy, and Abelard himself, who might well feature as the heroic exemplar of this stage of academic development (corresponding to Socrates) was condemned by two Councils of the Church and had to burn his first writings. Nonetheless, religion raises many of the questions to which the metaphysician and the physicist also respond, and it is difficult to see how the academic tradition could emerge from any other background. (It seems it never has). Further, the institutional features of universities unmistakably descend from the monastic tradition. The basic point, of course, is that no one can reliably predict when some academic point – a philosophical doctrine, an anthropological generalisation, an archaeological discovery – may be judged threatening to one or other of the dominant powers in a society. The totalitarian states of the twentieth century were no less dangerous to academic inquiry than the Christians of the later Inquisition had been. The world is irredeemably a dangerous place, even at times, for the mouse-like scholar who only wants to be left alone.

My third paradigm is the emergence of modern experimental science, and here it is less easy to fit an exemplar to a paradigm, but we might well select Galileo Galilei as a forerunner of Harvey, Newton, Lavoisier, Helmholtz, Einstein and many later figures. Galileo was an all-purpose polymath fascinated by how the natural world worked. His science persuaded him that Copernican heliocentricity was the

truth about cosmology, and he actually said it. He thus late in life had to face the Inquisition, and submit his opinion to Cardinals little less sophisticated than himself. The problem resolved itself into the distinction between the hypothetical and the real, and in the famous (and apparently true) story, Galileo in submitting to the Inquisition was heard to mutter: and yet, it moves! Here we have a type of event that has been played out many times again in the history of science, down to the rumpus over evolution and much else. There are always cherished, or prudent or perhaps even merely comfortable beliefs, that seek protection against what they imagine to be the threatening character of some academic argument.

Here then we have a case in which the logic in terms of which Europeans were understanding the world was scientific rather than philosophical. But in philosophy as in science, the point is to explain and understand the world, not to change or improve it, and that is why it is part of the tradition I am identifying with education. And if we had attended to later intellectual developments, we would have been able to recognise the achievement of historians and archaeologists in bringing back to life the experiences of people long dead and largely forgotten. We might, alternatively, have taken notice of the scholarship concerning old manuscripts, literary masterpieces, sacred texts and other such interests cultivated in universities and transforming, as they develop, the way in which the young are introduced to our civilisation. We might have mentioned logic and mathematics as part of the way in which the vast scope of human knowledge has ramified and become the preserve of many cooperating specialists, all recognising what a university is, its character as the bearer of tradition, the collegial character that does not modify its international aspects and the many devices it has developed in order to sustain its activities over the centuries. Our academic civilisation is literate and open to all human beings. Our technology is such that we have long transcended the old monopolies that protected craft secrets against others. Today, virtually any technology that attracts those in other civilisations is open to imitation by anyone, though its complexity might well be such that it requires enormous intellectual sophistication and resources of wealth to do it. An open society has created, for better or for worse, an open civilisation. What I am in this paper calling „education“ is an immense success, so successful, indeed, that sociologists often understand the university as the cognitive powerhouse of our civilisation. In doing so, they completely misunderstand its character as education.

Let me now consider what may be learned from these episodes about the realities of the educational tradition. I want to argue on the basis of my understanding of the university tradition that what I am taking to be education is always potentially in conflict with other interests and institutions in society. Above all,

academic inquiry will often find itself in conflict with *practice*. In practical life, both individually and collectively, we seek to achieve satisfactions and achieve our ends, but in education (except in an inescapable and trivial sense) there are no ends and satisfactions to be pursued. The dream of practice is a society in which all power has been so successfully mobilised that we are all happy and satisfied, while the reality of human life is that satisfactions have costs, and that they conflict with one another, as do the ends we all seek. I am presenting, then, a conflict view of Western society, and in the academic world, the conflicts are easy to illustrate. For example, academic argument has often been in conflict with the dogmas of churches. A particularly vibrant current example is the conflict between Creationists and Darwinians in the United States at the present moment. Again, nationalists seek to entrench historical legends in our politics, while racists have beliefs about genetic determination that have seldom survived academic criticism. Certain kinds of moral absolute are vulnerable to criticism by anthropologists and historians. We might indeed take this conflict to be symbolised by the classical education that so long dominated European thought, in which young people living in our Christian world were imaginatively drawn to live amid the vanished thoughts and creations of the Greeks and the Romans. The imaginative life of Europeans has always been in high degree, alienated. And one result of this, making Europeans unique as civilisations, is the interest we have also taken in the way other peoples live.

Let me make two comments on this conflict between education and practice.

The first is to say that the way practice operates, its dynamic power to subordinate the free play of the intellect to the narrow demands of policy, is in our time based on rationalist ideas. That is to say, practical people criticise historical institutions because they are thought to be inefficient in performing some essential function that may be plausibly ascribed to the institution. Any functional theory of a real existing institution will certainly discover that it is deficient because the real never corresponds to a concept. Universities are not, argues one typical rationalist critic, mobilising their immense intellectual power to the solving of pressing social problems. And what are the universities doing to advance national prosperity? The drive of practice is to maximise *power* and to direct it to generating satisfactions. The result of this approach is that we become confused because we come to think of education in terms of two distinct vocabularies, one concerned with reflection, the other concerned with power.

The educational activity of scholarship, says the rationalist, is really just a rather useless form of „research.“ What is the point of theory that brings no benefits to

others? And education itself, adds the rationalist, is really the practice of inculcating things called „skills“ into the young. A „skill“ is a practice that can generate a guaranteed and predictable outcome, and is thus distinct from education which certainly changes individuals, but not in ways that can be predicted and reliably used. Even the old ambition of extracting useful lessons for statesmen from the study of history, with its tired utilitarian aspirations, is another dream of the eager rationalist. As Hegel remarked, the only lesson you can get from history is that there are no lessons from history. He did, however, go on to create a philosophy of history that did give a meaning to the course of human history.

What society needs, says the rationalist, is training in the skills that allow us to improve our lives and increase our prosperity. The point of science is not to explore certain aspects of reality, but to generate useful knowledge. At this point, the educator will agree that educating the young does indeed require the learning such skills as the mastery of grammar, the art of reading, arithmetical tables, chemical formulae and other such things. But, adds the educator, such skills are not actually education, but merely one of its necessary preliminaries.

The basic distinction, the educator will insist, is between education and training.

What we call „indoctrination“, as by totalitarian governments, is in fact a training in making the supposedly right responses in the way we think. Governments are very keen on „training“ people because they often want to make them different – as the European Union does, for example, in trying (no doubt virtuously) to inculcate a sentiment of Europe-wide harmony and cooperation in all European countries. In this kind of ambition, education as the free play of the mind turns into a kind of industrial process, whose point is to make people the instruments of whatever supposedly virtuous aims authority has in mind.

Again, a concern with schools and universities has in the last two generations given way to a public policy concerned with a single system of national instruction called „higher education“. This semantically destroys the distinctiveness of educational institutions such as universities by assimilating them to a miscellany of different kinds of instruction intended for many different purposes. It conceives of education as a „system“ that can be manipulated by authority for whatever purposes are fashionable at the moment.

There is something dishonest about the rationalist „power vocabulary“ as it tries to subdue education to its own very different ambitions, and the easiest way to see this point is to pay attention to the misuse of words. We must, says the

rationalist (and the politician) „educate“ people to ...give up smoking, eat more healthily, transcend racial or religious prejudices, etc. Virtuous these aims may often be; educational, they are certainly not, and the beginning of wisdom in this area is to have a clear sense of the difference between educational language and the vocabulary of power. It is by such devices that educational thoughtfulness is transposed semantically into the hard stuff of criticism, problem solving and indoctrination.

Another aspect of practice in its rationalist form is the attempt to transpose the historical richness (and national variation) of educational institutions into arrangements that will more efficiently produce the consequences the politicians want. Criticism converts the concrete realities of actual universities into an „essence.“ It will be clear, for example, that the famous universities of the world – Heidelberg and Tübingen, Oxbridge, Harvard and Yale and so on – have a certain *cachet* that comes from the fact that they have lots of money and are (among other things) haunts of the rich. But (runs the practical argument) surely the essence of a university is that it should be a place of pure intelligence. The only test should be academic merit. Should we not therefore recruit purely in terms of examinations, dismissing from consideration as a reason for admitting a student the facts that the parents went to the College, that some people made notable donations etc? Just such pressures are being applied to universities all over the world, but they are by no means the only „reforms“ being foisted upon universities. Another practical policy is to bring the poor and the underprivileged into universities. And it is largely the power of governments that is turning independent institutions into instruments of political power.

Why not, one might think? One reason is that teaching in universities is not the same thing as teaching in schools. In universities, the undergraduates must contribute their reason and their passions to what is going on, otherwise the spark (to use Plato's image) will not be transmitted. If the undergraduates lack the talent to respond to inquiry, the universities will be converted into training schools.

But if we are concerned with a free society, we may also think that the cunning of history was wise in locating many of the rich (such as Abelard himself) among the academic ranks. The young and poor tend above all to be concerned with „getting on“ in the world. They are highly responsive to signals that indicate where advantage is to be gained. They are, in other words, „careerists.“ Their conception of a society tends to be that of a set of pigeonholes, and the point of education, and indeed life, is to find the best position. These are the young people of our days who will soon be „looking for a job.“ But the traditional university was full of people much more relaxed about careers and future jobs than the

young have recently become. No doubt many sought to make careers, but others were less utilitarian in their attitudes. Social pluralism may thus be understood as in itself a valuable contribution to academic autonomy. In other words, even a contingent feature of universities so evidently vulnerable to modification in terms of rationalist practice may be understood as valuable in ways that are far from obvious to the casual eye.

(6) Ultimately, the integrity and the vitality of universities depends on whether those who work in them understand exactly what makes them what they are. It is only if academics remain at a distance from the urgencies of practice that so fatally limit their creativity that education can play a real part in sustaining a free society.


And we may illustrate this by referring to another episode in the history of universities. The early scientists in the late middle ages had trouble disengaging their practices from those of magic. Astronomy had to detach itself from astrology, and chemistry was still haunted by alchemy until the late eighteenth century. The Baconian research programme promised Europeans a future of increasing power and comfort that echoes the Faustian dream of power. It is a tribute to the vitality of the academic tradition that it could reject these ideas and survive such vulgar temptations. The interest of the early natural philosophers was in truth rather than power. The world of nature was recognised not as a system of secrets that could give men power, but as a complex interaction of states of affairs. And it was precisely in rejecting those illusions of power that modern science became such an engine for the achievement of forms of power far beyond the circumscribed practical dreams of alchemists and astrologers. I take this as a parable about the nature of education: it thrives when it is free, and collapses when power tries to use it.

Let me end by suggesting that the temptations of a magical attitude towards our power over nature constitute a recurring temptation for any civilisation, even ours. Magic is merely a dream of power, but it is a dream hard to resist when the simplicities of despotism tempt those who wield the centralised power of the modern nation-state, or the uncontrolled ambitions of the European Union. No educated person doubts that the talk of politicians is for the most part vulgar, repetitive and devious, and that the state represents a power that must be limited to the few things it can do well. The vitality of modern Europe depends on a disdain for power rather than a submission to its demands. We cannot avoid being involved in practical life, but we would be wise to recognise that practice is a kind of cognitive prison from which only education can release us.









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