

## “Education as Socialization and as Individualization”

by Richard Rorty

When people on the political right talk about education, they immediately start talking about truth. Typically, they enumerate what they take to be familiar and self-evident truths and regret that these are no longer being inculcated in the young. When people on the political left talk about education, they talk first about freedom. The left typically views the old familiar truths cherished by the right as a crust of convention that needs to be broken through, vestiges of old-fashioned modes of thought from which the new generation should be freed.

When this opposition between truth and freedom becomes explicit, both sides wax philosophical and produce theories about the nature of truth and freedom. The right usually offers a theory according to which, if you have truth, freedom will follow automatically. Human beings, says this theory, have within them a truth-tracking faculty called ‘reason’, and instrument capable of uncovering the intrinsic nature of things. Once such obstacles as the passions or sin are overcome, the natural light of reason will guide us to the truth. Deep within our souls there is a spark that the right sort of education can fan into flame. Once the soul is afire with love of truth, freedom will follow --- for freedom consists of one’s capacity to be rational. So, the right concludes, only the truth can make us free.

This Platonic picture of education as the awakening of the true self can easily be adapted to the needs of the left. The left dismisses Platonic ascetism and exalts Socratic social criticism. It identifies the obstacles to freedom that education must overcome not with the passions or with sin but with convention and prejudice. What the right calls ‘overcoming the passions’, the left calls ‘stifling healthy animal instincts’. What the right thinks of as the triumph of reason, the left describes as the triumph of acculturation --- acculturation engineered by the powers that be. What the right describes as civilizing the young, the left describes as alienating them from their true selves. In the tradition of Rousseau, Marx, Nietzsche and Foucault, the left pictures society as depriving the young of their freedom and of their essential humanity so that they may function as frictionless cogs in a vast, inhuman socioeconomic machine. So, for the left, the proper function of education is to make the young realize that they should not consent to this alienating process of socialization. On the leftist’s inverted version of Plato, if you take care of freedom --- especially political and economic freedom --- truth will take care of itself. For truth is what will be believed once the alienating and repressive forces of society are removed.

On both the original, rightist and the inverted, leftist account of the matter, there is a natural connection between truth and freedom. Both argue for this connection on the basis of distinctions between nature and convention and between what is essentially human and what is inhuman. Both accept the identification of truth and freedom with the essentially human. The difference between them is simply over the question: Is the present socioeconomic set-up in accordance, more or less, with nature? Is it, on the whole, a realization of human potentialities, or rather a way of frustrating those potentialities? Will acculturation to the norms of our society produce freedom or alienation?

On abstract philosophical topics, therefore, the right and the left are largely in agreement. The interesting differences between right and left about education are concretely political. Conservatives think that the present set-up is, if not exactly good, at least better than any alternative suggested by the radical left. They think that at least some of the traditional slogans of our society, some pieces of its conventional wisdom, are the deliverances of ‘reason’. That is why they think education should concentrate on resurrecting and re-establishing what they call ‘fundamental truths which are now neglected or despised.’ Radicals, in contrast, share Frank Lentricchia’s view that the society in which we live is ‘mainly unreasonable’. So they regard the

conservative's 'fundamental truths' as what Foucault calls 'the discourse of power'. They think that continuing to inculcate the conventional wisdom amounts to betraying the students.

In the liberal democracies of recent times, the tension between these two attitudes has been resolved by a fairly simple, fairly satisfactory, compromise. The right has pretty much kept control of primary and secondary education and the left has gradually got control of non-vocational higher education. In America, our system of local school boards and the left has gradually got control of non-vocational higher education. In America, our system of local school boards means that pre-college teachers cannot, in the classroom, move very far from the local consensus. By contrast, the success of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in enforcing academic freedom means that many college teachers set their own agendas. So education up to the age of 18 or 19 is mostly a matter of socialization --- of getting the students to take over the moral and political common sense of the society as it is. It is obviously not only that, since sympathetic high school teachers often assist curious or troubled students by showing them where to find alternatives to this common sense. But these exceptions cannot be made the rule. For any society has a right to expect that, whatever else happens in the course of adolescence, the schools will inculcate most of what is generally believed.

Around the age of 18 or 19, however, American students whose parents are affluent enough to send them to reasonably good colleges find themselves in the hands of teachers well to the left of the teachers they met in high school. These teachers do their best to nudge each successive college generation a little more to the left, to make them a little more conscious of the cruelty built into our institutions, of the need for reform, of the need to be sceptical about the current consensus. Obviously this is not all that happens in college, since a lot of college is, explicitly or implicitly, vocational training. But our hope that colleges will be more than vocational schools is largely a hope that they will encourage such Socratic scepticism. We hope that the students can be distracted from their struggle to get into a high-paying profession, and that the professors will not simply try to reproduce themselves by preparing the students to enter graduate study in their own disciplines.

This means that most of the skirmishing about education between left and right occurs on the borders between secondary and higher education. Even ardent radicals, for all their talk of 'education for freedom,' secretly hope that the elementary schools will teach the kids to wait their turn in line, not to shoot up in the johns, to obey the cop on the corner, and to spell, punctuate, multiply and divide. They do not really want the high schools to produce, every year, a graduating class of amateur Zarathustras<sup>1</sup>. Conversely, only the most resentful and blinkered conservatives want to ensure that colleges hire only teachers who will endorse the status quo. Things get difficult when one tries to figure out where socialization should stop and criticism start.

This difficulty is aggravated by the fact that both conservatives and radicals have trouble realizing that education is not a continuous process from age five to age 22. Both tend to ignore the fact that the word 'education' covers two entirely distinct, and equally necessary, processes --- socialization and individualization. They both fall into the trap of thinking that a single set of ideas will work for both high school and college education. That is why both have had trouble noticing the differences between Allan

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<sup>1</sup> "Zarathustra" was an ancient Persian prophet. But Rorty here is referring to the character of the same name in Friedrich Nietzsche's 1885 book, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Nietzsche fictionalizes and dramatizes Zarathustra toward his own literary and philosophical aims, presenting him as a returning visionary who repudiates the designation of good and evil and thus marks the observation of the death of God. Nietzsche asserted that he had chosen to put his ideas into the mouth of Zarathustra because the historical prophet had been the first to proclaim the manicheic opposition between "good" and "evil", by rejecting the Daēva (representing natural forces) in favor of a moral order represented by the Ahuras. It was this act that Nietzsche proposed to invert. Beyond Good and Evil, however, does not mean "beyond good and bad", as he warned in this work. (from Wikipedia.com)

Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*<sup>2</sup> and E.D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*<sup>3</sup>. The cultural left in America sees Bloom and Hirsch as examples of a single assault on freedom, twin symptoms of a fatuous Reaganite complacency. Conservatives on the other hand, overlook the difference between Bloom's Straussian doubts about democracy and Hirsch's Deweyan hopes for a better educated democratic electorate: They think of both books as urging us to educate for truth, and to worry less about freedom.

Let me now put some of my own cards on the table. I think that Hirsch is largely right about the high schools and Bloom largely wrong about the colleges. I think that the conservatives are wrong in thinking that we have either a truth-tracking faculty called 'reason' or a true self that education brings to consciousness. I think that the radicals are right in saying that if you take care of political, economic, cultural and academic freedom, then truth will take care of itself. But I think the radicals are wrong in believing that there is a true self that will emerge once the repressive influence of society is removed. There is no such thing as human nature, in the deep sense in which Plato and Strauss used this term. Nor is there such a thing as alienation from one's essential humanity due to societal repression, in the deep sense made familiar by Rousseau and the Marxists. There is only the shaping of an animal into a human being by a process of socialization, followed (with luck) by the self-individualization and self-creation of that human being through his or her own later revolt against that very process. Hirsch is dead right in saying that we Americans no longer give our children a secondary education that enables them to function as citizens of democracy. Bloom is dead wrong in thinking that the point of higher education is to help students grasp the 'natural' superiority of those who lead 'the theoretical life'. The point of non-vocational higher education is, instead, to help students realize that they can reshape themselves --- that they can rework the self-image foisted on them by their past, the self-image that makes them competent citizens, into a new self-image that they themselves have helped to create.

I take myself, in holding these opinions, to be a fairly faithful follower of John Dewey<sup>4</sup>. Dewey's great contribution to the theory of education was to help us get rid of the idea that education is a matter of either inducing or educating truth. Primary and secondary education will always be a matter of familiarizing the young with what their elders take to be true, whether it is true or not. It is not, and never will be, the function of lower-level education to challenge the prevailing consensus about what is true. Socialization has to come before individuation, and education for freedom cannot begin before some constraints have been imposed.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Closing of the American Mind*, by conservative philosopher Allan Bloom (published in 1987), describes "how higher education has failed democracy and impoverished the souls of today's students." He especially targets the "openness" of Relativism as leading paradoxically to the great "closing" referenced in the book's title. The book's lengthy introduction delineates two kinds of "openness". One sort stimulates the student to pursue "the good" by discovering new aspects of goodness in other times and places than the West; this is the sort that Bloom apparently favors. The other sort misuses the study of other cultures to prove the dogmatic, a priori assumption that our culture is not the best and that we have no special claim on knowing the good. Bloom criticizes the openness of cultural relativism, in which he claims: "the point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all." In line with Plato, whom he quotes periodically throughout the book, Bloom believes that it is incumbent on the individual to search for truth in order to have any hope of a higher life. He believes it is the unique obligation of the university to point students in this very direction. Like Tocqueville and Nietzsche, Bloom asserts that democracy--by valuing the opinion of each citizen equally--is not an environment in which genius excels. It is therefore the university that needs to lead the lost art of living the good life. Contemporary critical reaction to the book was politically polarised, but many of those hostile to Bloom's conclusions acknowledged the value of the book's recapitulation of the history of political philosophy. (from the Wikipedia.com entry)

<sup>3</sup> *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Need to Know*, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr. (published in 1988) argues that "children in the U.S. are being deprived of the basic knowledge that would enable them to function in contemporary society." The book concludes with a list of 5,000 "essential facts" which he believes Americans need to know to exercise their citizenship. Hirsch later published the highly successful Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, which attempts to expand and systematize his scheme for providing essential facts and reference points. The full text is available online at: <http://www.bartleby.com/59/>

<sup>4</sup> John Dewey (October 20, 1859 – June 1, 1952) was an American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer, whose thoughts and ideas have been greatly influential in the United States and around the world. He, along with Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, is recognized as one of the founders of the philosophical school of Pragmatism. He also is known as the father of functional psychology; he was a leading representative of the progressive movement in U.S. education during the first half of the 20th century (from Wikipedia.com).

But, for quite different reasons, non-vocational higher education is also not a matter of inculcating or educating truth. It is, instead, a matter of inciting doubt and stimulating imagination, thereby challenging the prevailing consensus. If pre-college education produces literate citizens and college education produces self-creating individuals, then questions about whether students are being taught the truth can safely be neglected.

Dewey put a new twist on the idea that if you take care of freedom, truth will take care of itself. For both the original Platonism of the right and the inverted Platonism of the left, that claim means that if you free the true self from various constraints it will automatically see truth. Dewey showed us how to drop the notion of 'the true self' and how to drop the distinction between nature and convention. He taught us to call 'true' whatever belief results from a free and open encounter of opinions, without asking whether this result agrees with something beyond that encounter. For Dewey, the sort of freedom that guarantees truth is not freedom from the passions or sin. Nor is it freedom from tradition or from what Foucault called 'power'. It is simply sociopolitical freedom, the sort of freedom found in bourgeois democracies. Instead of justifying democratic freedoms by reference to an account of human nature and the nature of reason, Dewey takes the desire to preserve and expand such freedoms as a starting point --- something we need not look behind. Instead of saying that free and open encounters track truth by permitting a mythical faculty called 'reason' to function unfettered, he says simply that we have no better criterion of truth than that it is what results from such encounters.

This account of truth --- the account that has recently been revived by Jurgen Habermas ---- amounts to putting aside the notion that truth is correspondence to reality. More generally, it puts aside the idea that inquiry aims at accurately representing what lies outside the human mind (whether this be conceived as the will of God, or the layout of Plato's realm of ideas, or the arrangement of atoms in the void). It thereby gets rid of the idea that sociopolitical institutions need to be 'based' on some such outside foundation.

For Dewey, as for Habermas, what takes the place of the urge to represent reality accurately is the urge to come to free agreement with our fellow human beings --- to be full participating members of a free community of inquiry. Dewey offered neither the conservative's philosophical justification of democracy by reference to eternal values nor the radical's justification of democracy by reference to decreasing alienation. He did not try to justify democracy at all. He saw democracy not as founded upon the nature of man or reason or reality but as a promising experiment engaged in by a particular herd of a particular species of animal --- our species and our herd. He asks us to put our faith in ourselves --- in the utopian hope characteristic of democratic community --- rather than asking for reassurance or backup from outside.

This notion of a species of animals gradually taking control of its own evolution by changing its environmental conditions leads Dewey to say, in good Darwinian language, that 'growth itself is the moral end' and that to 'protect, sustain and direct growth is the chief ideal of education'. Dewey's conservative critics denounced him for fuzziness, for not giving us a criterion of growth. But Dewey rightly saw that any such criterion would cut the future down to the size of the present. Asking for such a criterion is like asking a dinosaur to specify what would make for a good mammal or asking a fourth-century Athenian to propose forms of life for the citizens of a twentieth-century industrial democracy.

Instead of criteria, Deweyans offer inspiring narratives and fuzzy utopias. Dewey had stories to tell about our progress from Plato to Bacon to the Mills, from religion to rationalism to experimentalism, from tyranny to feudalism to democracy. In their later stages, his stories merged with Emerson's and Whitman's descriptions of the democratic vistas --- with their vision of America as the place where human beings will become unimaginably wonderful, different and free. For Dewey, Emerson's talent for criterionless hope was the essence of his value to the country. In 1903 Dewey wrote: '[T]he coming century may well make evident what is just now dawning, that Emerson is not only a philosopher, but that he is the Philosopher of

Democracy.’ Dewey’s point was that Emerson did not offer truth, but simply hope. Hope --- the ability to believe that the future will be unspecifiably different from, and unspecifiably freer than, the past --- is the condition of growth. That sort of hope was all that Dewey himself offered us, and by offering it he became our century’s Philosopher of Democracy.

Let me now turn to the topic of how a Deweyan conceives of the relation between pre-college and college education, between the need for socialization and the need to remove the barriers that socialization inevitably imposes. There is a standard caricature of Dewey’s views that says Dewey thought that kids should learn to multiply or to obey the cop on the corner only if they have democratically chosen that lesson for the day, or only if this particular learning experience happens to meet their currently felt needs. This sort of nondirective nonsense was not what Dewey had in mind. It is true, as Hirsch says, that Dewey ‘too hastily rejected “the piling up of information”’. But I doubt that it ever occurred to Dewey that a day would come when students could graduate from an American high school not knowing who came first, Plato or Shakespeare, Napoleon or Lincoln, Frederick Douglass or Martin Luther King, Jr. Dewey too hastily assumed that nothing would ever stop the schools from piling on the information and that the only problem was to get them to do other things as well.

Dewey was wrong about this. But he could not have foreseen the educationalist establishment with which Hirsch is currently battling. He could not have foreseen that the United States would decide to pay its pre-college teachers a fifth of what it pays its doctors. Nor did he foresee that an increasingly greedy and heartless American middle class would let the quality of education a child receives become proportional to the assessed value of the parents’ real estate. Finally, he did not foresee that most children would spend 30 hours a week watching televised fantasies, nor that the cynicism of those who produce these fantasies would carry over into our children’s vocabularies of moral deliberation.

But Dewey’s failures of prescience do not count against his account of truth and freedom. Nor should they prevent us from accepting his notion of the socialization American children should receive. For Dewey, this socialization consisted in acquiring an image of themselves as heirs to a tradition of increasing liberty and rising hope. Updating Dewey a bit, we can think of him as wanting the children to come to think of themselves as proud and loyal citizens of a country that, slowly and painfully, threw off a foreign yoke, freed its slaves, enfranchised its women, restrained its robber barons and licensed its trade unions, liberalized its religious practices, broadened its religious and moral tolerance, and built colleges in which 50 per cent of its population could enrol --- a country that numbered Jefferson, Thoreau, Susan B. Anthony, Eugene Debs, Woodrow Wilson, Walter Reuther, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Rosa Parks and James Baldwin among its citizens. Dewey wanted the inculcation of this narrative of freedom and hope to be the core of the socializing process.

As Hirsch quite rightly says, that narrative will not be intelligible unless a lot of information gets piled up in the children’s heads. Radical critics of Hirsch’s books have assumed that he wants education to be a matter of memorizing lists rather than reading interesting books, but his does not follow from what Hirsch says. All that follows is that the students be examined on their familiarity with the people, things and events mentioned in those books. Hirsch’s radical critics would sound more plausible if they offered some concrete suggestions about how to get such a narrative inculcated without setting examinations tailored to lists like Hirsch’s or if they had some suggestions about how 18-year-olds who find *Newsweek* over their heads are to choose between political candidates.

Let us suppose for a moment, that Hirsch’s dreams came true. Suppose we succeed not only in inculcating such a narrative of national hope in most of our students but in setting it in the larger context of a narrative of world history and literature, all this against the background of the world picture offered by the natural

sciences. Suppose, that is, that after pouring money into pre-college education, firing the curriculum experts, abolishing the licensing requirements, building brand new, magnificently equipped schools in the inner cities, and instituting Hirsch-like school-leaving examinations, it proves possible to make most American 19-year-olds as culturally literate as Dewey and Hirsch have dreamed they might be. What, in such a utopia, would be the educational function of American colleges? What would policymakers in higher education worry about?

I think all that they would then need to worry about would be finding teachers who were not exclusively concerned with preparing people to be graduate students in their various specialties and then making sure that these teachers get a chance to give whatever courses they feel like giving. They would still need to worry about making sure that higher education was not purely vocational --- not simply a matter of fulfilling prerequisites for professional schools or reproducing current disciplinary matrices. They would not, however, have to worry about the integrity of the curriculum or about the challenge of connecting learning -- - any more than administrators in French and German universities worry about such things. That sort of worry would be left to secondary school administrators. If Hirsch's dreams ever come true, then the colleges will be free to get on with their proper business. That business is to offer a blend of specialized vocational training and provocation to self-creation.

The socially most important provocations will be offered by teachers who make vivid and concrete the failure of the country of which we remain loyal citizens to live up to its own ideals -- the failure of America to be what it knows it ought to become. This is the traditional function of the reformist liberal left, as opposed to the revolutionary radical left. In recent decades, it has been the main function of American college teachers in the humanities and social sciences. Carrying out this function, however, cannot be made a matter of explicit institutional policy. For, if it is being done right, it is too complicated, controversial and tendentious to be the subject of agreement in a faculty meeting. Nor is it the sort of thing that can be easily explained to the governmental authorities or the trustees who supply the cash. It is a matter that has to be left up to individual college teachers to do or not do as they think fit, as their sense of responsibility to their students and their society inspires them. To say that, whatever their other faults, American colleges and universities remain bastions of academic freedom, is to say that the typical administrators would not dream of trying to interfere with a teacher's attempt to carry out such responsibilities.

In short, if the high schools were doing the job that lots of money and determination might make them able to do, the colleges would not have to worry about Great Books, or general education, or overcoming fragmentation. The faculty could just teach whatever seemed good to them to teach, and the administrators could get along nicely without much knowledge of what was being taught. They could rest content with making sure that teachers who want to teach a course that has never been taught before, or assign materials that have never been assigned before, or otherwise break out of the disciplinary matrix that some academic department has been perpetuating are free to do so --- as well as trying to ensure that teachers who might want to do such things get appointed to the faculty.

But, in the real world, the 19-year-olds arrive at the doors of the colleges not knowing a lot of the words on Hirsch's list. They still have to be taught a lot of memorable conventional wisdom of the sort that gets dinned into the heads of their co-evals in other countries. So the colleges have to serve as finishing schools, and the administrators sometimes have to dragoon the faculty into helping with this task. As things unfortunately --- and with luck only temporarily --- are, the colleges have to finish the job of socialization. Worse yet, they have to do this when the students are already too old and too restless to put up with such a process. It would be well for colleges to remind us that 19 is an age when young people should have finished absorbing the best that has been thought and said and should have started becoming suspicious of it. It would also be well for them to remind us that the remedial work that society currently forces college

faculties to undertake --- the kind of work that Great Books curricula are typically invented in order to carry out --- is just an extra chore, analogous to the custodial functions forced upon the high school teachers. Such courses may, of course, be immensely valuable to students – as they were to Allan Bloom and me when we took them at the University of Chicago 40 years ago. Nevertheless, carrying such remedial tasks is not the social function of colleges and universities.

We Deweyans think that the social function of American colleges is to help the students see that the national narrative around which their socialization has centred is an open-ended one. It is to tempt the students to take themselves into people who can stand to their own pasts as Emerson and Anthony, Debs and Baldwin, stood to their pasts. This is done by helping the students realize that, despite the progress that the present has made over the past, the good has once again become the enemy of the better. With a bit of help, the students will start noticing everything that is paltry and mean and unfree in their surroundings. With luck, these best of them will succeed in altering the conventional wisdom, so that the next generation is socialized in a somewhat different way than they themselves were socialized. To hope that this way will only be somewhat different is to hope that the society will remain reformist and democratic, rather than being convulsed by revolution. To hope that it will nevertheless be perceptibly different is to remind oneself that growth is indeed the only end that democratic higher education can serve and also to remind oneself that the direction of growth is unpredictable.

This is why we Deweyans think that, although Hirsch is right in asking, ‘What should they know when they come out of high school?’ and ‘What remedial work remains, things being as they are, for the colleges to do?’, the question, ‘What should they learn in college?’ had better go unasked. Such questions suggest that college faculties are instrumentalities that can be ordered to a purpose. The temptation to suggest this comes over administrators occasionally, as does the feeling that higher education is too important to be left to the professors. From an administrative point of view, the professors often seem self-indulgent and self-obsessed. They look like loose cannons, people whose habits of setting their own agendas needs to be curbed. But administrators sometimes forget that college students badly need to find themselves in a place in which people are not ordered to a purpose, in which loose cannons are free to roll about. The only point in having real live professors around instead of just computer terminals, videotapes and mimeod lecture notes is that students need to have freedom enacted before their eyes by actual human beings. That is why tenure and academic freedom are more than just trade union demands. Teachers setting their own agendas --- putting their individual, lovingly prepared specialties on display in the curricular cafeteria, without regard to any larger end, much less any institutional plan --- is what non-vocational higher education is all about.

Such enactments of freedom are the principal occasions of the erotic relationships between teacher and student that Socrates and Allan Bloom celebrate and that Plato unfortunately tried to capture in a theory of human nature and of the liberal arts curriculum. But love is notoriously untheorizable. Such erotic relationships are occasions of growth, and their occurrence and their development are as unpredictable as growth itself. Yet nothing important happens in non-vocational higher education without them. Most of these relationships are with the dead teachers who wrote the books the students are assigned, but some will be with the live teachers who are giving the lectures. In either case, the sparks that leap back and forth between teacher and student, connecting them in a relationship that has little to do with socialization but much to do with self-creation, are the principle means by which the institutions of a liberal society get changed. Unless some such relationships are formed, the students will never realize what democratic institutions are good for: namely, making possible the invention of new forms of human freedom, taking liberties never taken before.

I shall end by returning to the conservative-radical contrast with which I began. I have been trying to separate both the conservative’s insistence on community and the radical’s insistence on individuality from

philosophical theories about human nature and about the foundations of democratic society. Platonism and Nietzsche's inversion of Platonism seems to be equally unfruitful in thinking about education. As an alternative, I have offered Dewey's exaltation of democracy for its own sake and of growth for its own sake -- an exaltation as fruitful as it is fuzzy.

This fuzziness annoys the conservatives because it does not provide enough sense of direction and enough constraints. The same fuzziness annoys the radicals because it provides neither enough fuel for resentment nor enough hope for sudden, revolutionary change. But the fuzziness that Dewey shared with Emerson is emblematic of what Wallace Stevens and Harold Bloom call 'the American Sublime'. That Sublime still lifts up the hearts of some fraction of each generation of college students.