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Liberally Educating Patriots

As our world becomes more global, more welcoming, and more inclusive, it might seem increasingly obvious that caring about patriotism is a jingoistic anachronism. I am not so sure that it is. In fact—with the requisite clarifications—it is quite appropriate that we care about patriotism and ensure that it has a place in the liberal arts curriculum. To understand why this is there are a couple basic questions that should be touched on. First, what is a liberal arts education? And, second, what is patriotism?

It can be enormously difficult to single out just what the liberal arts *are*, particularly when the university is to home to such a cacophony of different purposes and demands. The social critic Yuval Levin offers a clarifying typology. American universities have always been home to three competing understandings of the university's purpose. The first sees the university primarily as an institution of vocational training that should teach people the skills for economic success. The second sees it as a school of moral activism oriented towards teaching students the ways of justice. Both are important, but neither are really about the liberal arts. Liberal education belongs to the third vision: that the university's purpose is to “enable a search for the truth wherever it leads, without regard for economic or sociopolitical utility” and to “expose a rising generation to the deepest and best of the wisdom of our civilization.”¹

That lack of regard for bare utility is perhaps what characterizes the liberal arts most of all. As the political theorist Elizabeth Corey suggests, both vocational training and justice

¹ Yuval Levin, *A Time to Build* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 92-3.

activism belong to a “practical-political” understanding of the university—they see education as fundamentally of secondary importance to other, more pressing concerns.² This does not mean that the practical-political view has no place, but the liberal arts are unique in affirming the value of education as an end in itself. Indeed, the knowledge after which education seeks is not really about *doing* anything at all. The search for truth can involve quite a lot of effort, but the 20th century philosopher Josef Pieper observes that “the essence of *knowledge* does not consist in the effort for which it calls, but in grasping existing things and in unveiling reality.” It might perhaps even be said that “the highest form of knowledge comes to man like a gift.”³ Although this all does not amount to a tight definition of the liberal arts it should provide some clarity: the liberal arts are about receiving and appreciating at least as much as creating and innovating.

It will turn out, as we turn to our other question, that this description might also be true of patriotism. However, before moving too much further on, we must note a distinction made by George Orwell. Patriotism, Orwell wrote, is a

devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life, which one believes to be the best in the world but has no wish to force on other people. Patriotism is of its nature defensive, both militarily and culturally. Nationalism, on the other hand, is inseparable from the desire for power. The abiding purpose of every nationalist is to secure more power and more prestige.⁴

This is helpful because it gives us the beginning of an understanding of patriotism and because it separates patriotism from nationalism, its dangerous and ill-regarded cousin. There is nothing about patriotism that requires it to coincide with (often contingent and rather arbitrary) national boundaries.

² Elizabeth Corey, “The University Has No Purpose,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 64, no. 34 (May 25 2018).

³ Josef Pieper, *Leisure the Basis of Culture* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 34. Emphasis in original.

⁴ George Orwell, “Notes on Nationalism,” The Orwell Foundation, 1945, accessed March 27, 2020, <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/notes-on-nationalism/>.

Patriotism is oriented not towards conquest and chauvinism but towards gratitude and affection for the particular places and ways of being that we have been given. As Alexis de Tocqueville, the great observer of American democracy writes, patriotism holds dear “the family, memories of the past, activities of the present, and dreams for the future.”⁵ At a time when the liturgies of consumer capitalism and the urgency of social media direct our attention solely to the present, patriotism tells us to expand our horizons into the past and future. It directs us away from abstract cults of nation or state and towards stewardship and care for the local and particular. It is in this vein that essayist Wendell Berry writes that truly patriotic citizens “love their land with a knowing, intelligent, sustaining, and protective love. ... And they must not allow their patriotism to be degraded to a mere loyalty to symbols or any present set of officials.”⁶ This is the patriotism that is appropriate for a liberal arts curriculum.

The liberal arts orient us towards loving things for their own sake—in particular, the gift of knowledge. Patriotism does something of the same, in a way that is markedly embodied and particular. As the liberal arts reject an instrumental practical-political view of learning, so patriotism rejects an instrumental, contingent view of one’s place and manner of being. As the liberal arts are grateful for and cherish the gift that is the deepest and best of the wisdom that came before, so patriotism is grateful for and cherishes the gift that is its home and way of life. Importantly, gratitude is not the same thing as being uncritical. It is unquestionably true that the knowledge and ways of the past are often the deserving objects of criticism. Fortunately, the liberal arts and patriotism are not solely backward-looking. They are also about the “search for truth” and the “dreams for the future.” However, it requires stewardship and care to distinguish

⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J.P. Mayer (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966), 367.

⁶ Wendell Berry, *Citizenship Papers* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2003), 10.

the worthy from the unworthy in our gifts of knowledge and place. Without that care, the temptation is to throw it *all* out when a flaw is found—and surely that is not the right thing to do. Liberal learning and patriotism are, then, closely related habits of mind that try to address the tension between the riches of thick tradition and the hope of progress. And, if liberal education is concerned with the whole person, it seems most appropriate that it would turn to the resources of patriotism to speak to some of the most vital parts of its student’s lives—the lands and life-ways that have been given to them.