A PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION: OUR EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND THE ECONOMY

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The topics of education and the role of educational institutions in society are seldom far from the headlines, the lips of politicians, schoolteachers and parents. Discussion of education (and its associated institutions) within these forums tends to assume uncritically that its ultimate point is to benefit the economy and, by extension, empower the individual through increased prestige and material wealth. This article argues that such a conception of education is misguided and, indeed dangerous, as it estranges us from forms of thought that are frequently united with our conception of what it means to be human, alongside damaging prospects of long-term economic welfare. It is, therefore, the responsibility of our educational institutions to maintain a critical resistance to the culture of the times by ensuring that they do not merely become factories that train their students in ways purely designed to maximize economic impact and increased personal wealth.

The matter of education is never far from the headlines, frequently taking centre stage. In a now famous speech, Tony Blair placed an economically based conception of it at the centre of his 1997 election campaign. More recently, since the onset of the economic crisis, educational institutions have come under the spotlight in terms of what they are able to contribute to the economic welfare of the nation.

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This has resulted in universities being instructed to optimize their research and teaching in areas that are most likely to have immediate social and economic impact. Inevitably, closures and attempted closures of university departments have followed. These closures (or attempts at them) have been motivated and, to a large extent, justified by the university senior management teams that have implemented them, on grounds of economic utility; generally speaking, the victims have been disciplines that characterize the arts and humanities.

Individuals are asked to buy into this argument on grounds of increased personal wealth. The overarching idea, of course, is that overall improved economic performance will serve to improve the individual living standards of citizens. There is nothing wrong in that *per se* – indeed it is an admirable goal – but when it is done at the expense of aspects of our lives that nourish meaning and understanding of the human condition, it becomes damaging in ways that run far deeper than seem immediately obvious.

Understanding the idea of schools and universities in society is directly related to our conception of education. What do they provide? In the media, and in life more generally outside the academic environment, their value is generally considered to centre on their importance to the economy; watching an episode of the BBC's *Question Time* should be enough to assure you of that.

Such emphasis has served to encourage thought that academic life – particularly in more established universities – is often significantly detached from our typical ways of living. For that reason, many outside the academic sphere are apt to criticize it as retreating into ivory towers and away from 'the real world'. The 'value for money' argument, in terms of projected 'real world' economic return, is frequently employed by politicians to justify their policy decisions and, to a large extent, the popular media in their critical discussions of the amount of state funding that such ivory towers should receive. Universities, it would seem, exist to educate students for the jobs market and, insofar as they

comprise communities of academics (experts in their field), serve as research institutions to further knowledge that will directly benefit the economy.

Thus, today, even within universities, the idea of education as something that is purely a means to an end is becoming more pervasive than ever. Many arts and humanities disciplines are, at best, conceived of as adornments to the proper business of the day, something that a few naive academic idealists indulge in but, otherwise, are of little value. The idea that one should dedicate oneself to a discipline rather than a solid career (sometimes termed 'a proper job') is seen as quaint in others and, more than occasionally, as proper cause for shame in our nearest and dearest. In tandem with this is the thought that education for its own sake – as something that can nurture an individual's love of the world – is an anachronism; a view now only held by outdated academics with a rather 'precious' attitude towards it. This kind of thinking has resulted in the development of utilitarian degrees such as *Business Administration, Tourism* and *Education Management*; worthy though such courses may be, they are far removed from authentic forms of academic life that boast disciplines with distinguished academic histories; histories characterized by faithful commitment to those disciplines, as opposed to extrinsic justifications of them.

Within this cultural climate, many parents discourage their offspring from considering arts-based subjects at university because they perceive them to be disadvantageous to their offspring's job prospects, and even some teachers – appallingly in my view – suggest that pursuing arts and humanities subjects at undergraduate level is a 'soft' option. Those who still elect to study disciplines such as philosophy, literature, fine art or music often face questions such as, 'what are you going to do with that?' or condescending comments implying that they cannot expect a free ride and need to be prepared to give something back to society.

What is to be made of all of this? Are economic imperatives what education really boils down to?

At their core, our educational institutions need to maintain a certain resistance to the external cultural pressures of their times. By that, I do not mean that they should disregard the cultural climate in which they are embedded, or that how they educate should be unresponsive to that cultural climate; were that the case, our education would, obviously, be incomplete. However, I am saying that one should treat our current values, beliefs, and how we think about them, in ways that do not – automatically at least – assume them to be superior to other ways of thinking that might nourish different forms of thought and, as such, forms of life. Understanding what counts as properly relating to those beliefs in a particular cultural setting will ensure that one is given the space that allows one to come into contact with them in ways that make it possible for us to assess them soberly, rather than as merely anachronisms or the products of 'traditions' or 'social norms'. That is the space that universities (as ivory towers) provide, and why arts and humanities degrees are so valuable. The arts and humanities allow us to come into direct contact with forms of thought from other times and cultures as well as our own; the universities provide a protective bubble in which our assessment of them is unhindered by the cultural and political pressures of the times. When such values and beliefs are treated as anachronisms or 'traditions', their authority to speak to us with the same force that they once held – or with the kind of force that our current values now hold – is compromised. The role of an arts and humanities education is fundamental to understanding the distinctions that we draw between such things, and – more importantly – why we draw them.

Anachronistic though the concept of ivory towers may seem to be in contemporary culture, they are fundamental to the perpetuation of individual independence of mind; yet that is precisely why they are not thought of as 'part of the real world'. It is the latter thought – that of living in the 'real world' as opposed to an ivory tower – which is symptomatic of a form of understanding that sees universities as wholly answerable to the idea of 'what can be done with

them'. As progressively greater pressure is applied to universities to become 'more relevant to the modern age' by threatening funding cuts unless they comply with government wishes, the protective bubble with which such institutions shield their academics and students will burst. That is what is happening now with the funding cuts that are resulting in the proposed and actual closures of departments within the arts and humanities.

In a number of Plato's dialogues the character Socrates expresses the thought that human life provides the possibility of infinitely deepening one's understanding, knowledge and love of the world.[1] If, in principle, we accept this thought, then it follows that to neglect such a possibility in favour of focusing on economic imperatives, either actively or passively, is not fully to realize human capability. Are we wholeheartedly to neglect such a capability in favour of the economic argument? Certainly, if we do so, the possibility of the perpetuation of independence of mind is compromised insofar as how we are 'educated' will be limited to what has been understood to yield most economic benefit. The reason for my use of inverted commas around 'educated' is because such an economically based conception of education is really just a species of training. Training sets limits around what is learnt because it is accountable to particular ends; education can have no such limits (there is no end in sight). This is a straightforward conceptual difference; education is about the development of individual independence of mind and the possibility of perpetually deepening one's thinking; training is not.

Nevertheless, I doubt the thoughts expressed immediately above would cut much ice with those arguing for an economically driven conception of education. One can imagine responses of the kind: 'We don't care about education in terms of deepened understanding and a love of the world; we care about the mighty dollar! Express your conception of education in dollars, and then we will care; otherwise it's just navel gazing! What we need to do is get on with the proper business of the day!'

What is puzzling however, particularly in terms of humanities education, is that the economic argument does not seem to apply to the same extent in relation to healthcare. The government would be seen as cruel if it denied healthcare to the elderly or terminally ill, even though to do so would be an economically beneficial strategy. Similarly, billions of pounds have been spent on a Large Hadron Collider which does nothing of economic value; it seeks only to pursue the unknown, but doubtless at the expense of investment in areas that would yield substantial economic reward. Interestingly, in this latter case, much less is heard in relation to the thought that such scientific developments are worthless unless they have immediate social and economic impact.

These attitudes, together with the development of policies, in relation to education, healthcare and science are based on questions of value; such questions are, at their core, philosophical, and the answers to them are not written into the fabric of the universe, or the disciplines themselves. Accordingly, there is a certain irony in the present economically driven attitude towards humanities education because it is such education which concerns itself with deepening our understanding and knowledge of the attitudes and values which are internal to such policy developments and our assessments of them. Put another way: the belief that education is of little value beyond what it can do for the economy, and that our educational institutions should be accountable to market forces, appeals to the very dimensions of education that it labels as redundant or navel gazing.

It is humanities disciplines, such as history and philosophy, that specialize in understanding the kinds of value we place on scientific advances and questions about prioritizing life over money (or vice versa) in relation to healthcare of the elderly. Doubtless, those who advocate the economically driven conception of education have their reasons for valuing it the way they do, and perhaps can also justify why they would treat healthcare of the elderly differently.

However, all of these positions (and their justifications) are based, in one way or another, on ideas about what it is good to value and why. A nuanced understanding of values cannot be addressed by the sciences because the modes of thought that characterize good and bad thinking in terms of understanding questions of value are not those that characterize good and bad scientific thought. One cannot, for example, criticize a scientific proposition for being sentimental without collapsing into nonsense (although one can reveal faults in a scientific investigation and its associated results that are caused by sentimentality), but one can intelligibly criticize an approach to healthcare in relation to the elderly on such grounds.

It is also worth noting that there are numerous cases of people who have spent much of their lives dedicated to the accumulation of wealth and prestige, only to suffer a personal tragedy and find out that that was not what really mattered to them after all. In such cases, as the moral philosopher Raimond Gaita explains, '[w]e have mistaken as the source of value that which was merely necessary to us, without which our lives would have appeared senseless to us'.[2] Such a mistake is often only understood after the loss of a loved one, for instance, and is frequently characterized as a form of deepened understanding. Deep thought provides us with the possibility of encountering and nurturing ways of thinking previously unknown to us – that is a conceptual truth about the notion of deep thought and is why we tend to describe such reassessments as exemplifying forms of it.

I am not denying that education has great economic value – it does, and we should all understand the need for a stable economy and what measures are required to attain it; similarly, academics and students need to understand that they should not be immune from the consequences of the economic crisis. That said, it is not in anyone's interests to limit education to answerability to social and economic impact. Our best interests lie in nurturing the education of every individual, irrespective of his or her predicted

subsequent social and economic performance. What such individuals 'give back' to society may take many forms (not necessarily economic or technological) and may also take a number of years to achieve. Sometimes what they can be said to have 'given back' may forever resist statistical quantification. This has been particularly true of many respected cultural figures – for instance, Martin Amis, Graham Greene, Kazuo Ishiguro and Salman Rushdie, many of whose novels have, in multifarious ways, nourished our understanding of the values that support our ethical judgements. Moreover, who are we to judge that such an impoverished economically driven conception of education is a worthy inheritance to bequeath to our children? It is a strange and worrying kind of arrogance which claims to know that depriving them of the prospect of entering a world of education, which makes it possible for them to deepen their understanding, knowledge and love of the world without limit, is all for the good (not to mention knowing it is something they would want).

In any case, the phrase 'giving back to society' is pejorative, but it is one that has been used with increasing frequency in the debate about justifying funding for arts and humanities subjects in higher education. It suggests that society has put itself out to provide such an education, and that those who receive it are morally (or financially) in debt to it. Yet those in education do not exist outside society; they are a part of it. Students who have benefited from an arts and humanities education have not acted as parasites on society; their interests simply run counter to the interests or opinions of others. That is how society functions and what defines it as such. Those who claim that students are required to give something back are merely expressing ways of promoting their own sectional interests by dressing them up as more legitimate; by saying that their interests are those of society rather than those they are opposed to.[3]

A properly educated society – one that has read many of the great philosophical, literary and historical texts of the past and listened to its music, as opposed to one just

geared towards particular ends – will understand itself better, as well as being able to rise more effectively to the demands of unpredictable external pressures. If our education system continues to be subject to the short-sighted opinions and ideologies of politicians and university management structures, then we run the risk of being reduced to trading purely on the intellectual capital of our past, and that will eventually have an adverse social and economic effect. The persuasive argument that a subject is only practical if it benefits the jobs market (and the economy more generally) is a spurious one. For if courses such as philosophy, music or history are designed and delivered with the thought in mind that they are ultimately answerable to the economy and employment figures (as opposed to themselves), then, whatever it is one is doing, it will not, in the end, be that discipline, but rather training for just one thing. This is as true for science subjects as it is for humanities subjects. Put another way: *if an institution is sincere in offering a discipline and a student is sincere in their study of it, then neither can contrast the demands of that discipline with what is practical in terms of graduate employability or economic growth. Anything else amounts to an inauthentic study of a discipline because the standards by which it would be judged would not be those of the discipline itself.*

Money is necessary to improve standards of living and help others, so we should not stop trying to attain it. But to take it as the ultimate arbiter of value, as something we ought to dedicate our lives to – on pain of shame or disapproval – is to confuse the necessary with the good. For us to think lucidly about what really matters, we need to attain clarity about the differences between what is necessary and what is good, attending to the realms of meaning – exemplified in the humanities – that nourish our sense of that distinction. Someone, for example, who puts material gain above the welfare of other human beings is generally thought of as someone who ought to be ashamed of himself even if he feels no shame (consider some of the more senior figures implicated in the banking crisis, for instance). By contrast, someone who selflessly gives their

earnings to those in need, or raises money for charity, is morally revered. It is plain that economic welfare and individual wealth and prestige assist us in helping others, but it is equally plain that such things are not, by themselves, arbiters of human value and, consequently, do not assist us in deepening our understanding of why it matters that we should help others (or, for that matter, increase the economic performance of a nation).

Artists (musicians, poets, painters, novelists, philosophers, etc.) and their arts, together with academics, enliven the life of a culture and, by implication, contribute to its education. How often does one appeal to the arts for lucidity in times of trouble? How often do we turn to poetry and music at points in our lives where meaning really matters – such as at funerals or weddings? What good reason is there for us to ignore the skills necessary to express, reveal and deepen the forms of thought that characterize these aspects of our lives, when they are fundamental to the ways in which we put value on human life and its activities? Would we want unskilled poetry and music at our weddings and funerals, sloppily expressing thoughts that mean so much? In each of these cases, skills associated with the arts allow us to express attitudes from standpoints nourished by our grasp of an idea and the individual artist's treatment of it.

Nevertheless, leaving aside the obvious economic benefits of the production of films and the expertly crafted and performed scripts and music that are required for their success (together with the fact that so much money-making technology has developed in order for us to enjoy the arts in the comfort of our own homes), as an advocate of the economically based conception of education, one might still ask whether we really need new poems, music, and the like. After all, the same music is invariably used at most weddings and funerals, so why pay for anything new?

Novelty is a misleading way of thinking about humanities education because it is wrong to think that deepened thought and new thought amount to the same thing. The

development of new thoughts sometimes requires deepened thought, but it is by no means always so; one can have plenty of new thoughts without being a deep thinker. Nothing in an economically accountable conception of education excludes the possibility of new thoughts (indeed, it often requires them) but it does, to a large degree, exclude the possibility of deepened thought, because it fails to notice that deepened thought requires a non-economically answerable attentiveness to the ways in which we treat our current value-concepts. Frequently, such ways of thinking are deepened by differing artistic treatments of existing concepts – consider, for instance, the (different) contributions Mozart, Fauré and Duruflé have made to the idea of a requiem and how such contributions have served to enliven that concept.[4] Sometimes, of course, artistic treatments of concepts can leave previously poignant expressions of them vulnerable to cliché or parody – consider, for instance, the way in which Richard Curtis's film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* treats W. H. Auden's treatment of the concept of mourning in his poem 'Stop All The Clocks'. However we conceive of those examples, the failure to attend to current thinking about value-concepts in ways that provide the possibility of deepening our understanding of them goes hand-in-hand with the failure to provide a protective bubble in which such attentiveness provides the forum for evaluation (of ways of thinking) that is not answerable to the economic imperatives of the age.

The enrichment that such artistic activities and their associated ways of thinking contribute to our own lives, in terms of providing the tools for us to better understand the most joyous and tragic points in them, also enable us to understand one another better by providing us with a richer conception of what it means to be human. And, as I have already discussed, developing such ways of thinking, unencumbered by thoughts about economic accountability, will further enable us to respond to unforeseen external pressures placed on us by our competitors, because we will be more able to identify (and understand) how we relate to

them – not merely in economic terms but in human terms also. That is why our educational institutions should continue to fund disciplines in the humanities and provide a protective bubble in which the thinking that characterizes such disciplines can be protected from the pressures of the times.

Thus, even if one remains unimpressed by the argument that we should fund education for its own sake, it needs to be understood that allowing the opportunity for students to enter an academic form of life where nothing matters more than to rise to the highest standards within their chosen discipline will, in the end, prove more beneficial to the welfare (in all senses) of a country than making education merely answerable to particular ends.

An enlivened conception of what it means to be human, nourished by the arts and associated academic disciplines, has the potential to enrich a life beyond measure. It is, I believe, an obligation to make such education available, because it is only through doing so that we may rise to the possibilities allowed for by human life; certainly, the pursuing of a discipline for its own sake should not be an activity for which one is made to feel ashamed. Moreover, those who claim that studying arts and humanities subjects limits one's options are making such an assessment from the economic standpoint (statistics do not, in fact, support this view; it has been shown that humanities graduates have a wide range of employment options open to them[5]).[6] If however, one conceives of education as answerable to the idea that human life provides the possibility of infinitely deepening one's understanding, knowledge and love of the world, then whatever one studies will, in some sense, widen one's options through making available forms of thought that one had never before contemplated. That should be all that is needed to persuade someone of the merits of education for its own sake. Nevertheless, for those who remain unconvinced, it is worth remembering that so many of the technological products that are necessary for the economic welfare of the country are tied up with the kinds of unencumbered thought characterized and

expressed in the arts and authentic academic life. We like to watch television dramas, listen to the radio, enjoy music through personal audio equipment, and watch films on tablets whilst commuting, for example.

If we allow dimensions of our artistic and academic culture to be lost through a single-minded pursuit of wealth, we estrange ourselves from forms of thought that are, more often than not, united with our conception of what it means to be human and, consequently, put the long-term welfare of future generations at risk by depriving our children of a wonderful artistic and academic inheritance together with secure, long-term, economic welfare.

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Notes

[1] See especially the Platonic dialogues *The Apology* and *Gorgias*.

[2] R. Gaita, *A Common Humanity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), 242.

[3] R. Rhees, 'Responsibility to Society', in *Without Answers* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1969), 88.

[4] R. Rhees, 'Art and Philosophy', in *Without Answers* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1969), 140.

[5] D. Matthews, 'Oxford Survey Finds Humanities Degrees Pay', *Times Higher Education*, <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/oxford-survey-finds-humanities-degrees-pay/2005628.article> [accessed 18 November 2014].

[6] R. Garner, 'Education Secretary Nicky Morgan Tells Teenagers: Want to Keep Your Options Open? Then Do Science', *The Independent*: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/education-secretary-nicky-morgan-tells-teenagers-if-you-want-a-job-drop-humanities-9852316.html> [accessed 18 November 2014].