

Human Powers

A statement by Thomas F. Green about the worth of education can help to orient our consideration of values and liberal education. Green suggests:

We are born into the world, but we are educated into possession of our powers—our powers for the exercise of intellect, emotion, imagination, judgment, memory, observation, and action in a coherent way Coming into possession of the powers that we have as human beings—that is the good, the value if you wish, that is the defining presence of educational worth.¹

Notice that Green's sense of human powers is inclusive not narrow, for it includes not only powers of the intellect, but also a range of capacities related to emotion, judgment, imagination, and action. The human powers of "valuing" must be such capacities both in themselves and as woven into other powers, especially to achieve coherent action.

Green's focus on the development of human powers as the source of educational worth finds confident echoes throughout history and in the self-understanding and practice of contemporary liberal education. Several influential recent studies make precisely this claim as they analyze and propose a direction for liberal education. Donald Levine's *Powers of the Mind: the Reinvention of Liberal Education in America* traces the evolution of the curriculum at the University of Chicago's undergraduate College in terms of the motif in its title.² From William Rainey Harper's earliest pronouncements as founding president, to the exceptional intellectual leadership of Robert Maynard Hutchins in the 1930s and 40s, to the work of giants on the faculty such as Richard McKeon, Levine's narrative is focused on the College's commitment to develop the powers of mind. Echoing a long Western and American tradition about the goal of education to foster intellectual discipline, Harper noted in 1905, "The purpose of the college . . . is . . . to develop in the man systematic habits; to give him control of his intellectual powers."³

Powers of the Mind

As Levine tells the Chicago story and offers his own account of eight powers of the mind, he demonstrates a striking consistency with Green's analysis. Levine's powers conform to the metaphor of "breathing" as our powers of mind "inhale" and "exhale" the world. We take in the

world through our multiple powers of apprehension and understanding, and then transform elements of the world by means of our powers of expression, including problem-solving, deep self-awareness, intellectual integration, and communication. Note that for Levine the more active or creative powers of expression are "manifest in the workings of human agency."⁴ As Levine discusses the pedagogies appropriate to the formation of powers of the mind, it is clear that the teaching and learning process is a paradigm of engagement, a continuing dialogue that addresses the self not just the intellect. "This learning genre provides immediate entrée to the exercise of many sorts of powers, including the ability to listen, to interpret texts, to grasp cultural worlds, to test and express the self, to integrate knowledge, and to study the ways of communication."⁵ Learning and teaching powers of the mind requires its own set of methods and virtues that transcend narrow intellectualism. The teacher cultivates these through carefully structured questions, conversations, and assignments in courses of study that always include the masterworks of various intellectual traditions.

The virtuosity of Levine's approach and the creativity of the Chicago tradition are manifest, but questions arise as well. How more specifically do the academic values and methods of the inquiry translate into the lives of teachers and students in other contexts? What do the powers of the mind mean for the tasks of choosing and enacting values such as integrity and honesty, for the commitment to democratic values and virtues such as respect and tolerance, and for the exercise of leadership? Or is this rich and engaged form of liberal education as much as one needs, or can expect? Echoing the Platonic question of the relation of virtue and knowledge, can we say that the development of the powers of the mind inclines us toward virtue and leadership?

Intellectual Skills and Moral Capacities

Levine's approach broadly parallels other studies and reports that are representative of the contemporary understanding of liberal education. The former President of Harvard University, Derek Bok, defines the purposes of college largely in terms of the development of intellectual powers and cognitive skills. He emphasizes capacities in communication, critical thinking, moral reasoning, democratic citizenship, quantitative reasoning, and intercultural competence. Bok examines these and other topics from the point of view of both the academic program as well as the broader campus experience, so he analyzes educational

resources and possibilities from a wider angle of vision than Levine. Based on a review of extensive research on these and related topics, Bok concludes that most colleges and universities are developing their students' intellectual powers with a modest degree of effectiveness that could and should reach much higher levels of accomplishment.⁶

Bok's critique and his recommendations are based on a realistic assessment of the challenges in changing many of the embedded practices of the academy. Nonetheless, he looks for resources for change in every aspect of university life and marshals a persistent but balanced set of arguments and suggestions. When it comes to the area of values, it is clear that he has a deep commitment to the larger educational goals of democratic citizenship and integrity of character. He has confidence that courses on ethics and moral reasoning can raise both the level of ethical thought and of behavior. Moral imagination and moral reason can, for example, expose a person's rationalizations that lead to wrong and harmful actions. Even though Bok acknowledges that moral reasoning alone cannot cure unethical behavior, he believes that there is much that the institution can do to build a culture of practice that reinforces positive peer pressure among students and that limits negative conduct. In the sphere of democratic values, Bok displays a similar confidence that reasoned argument and substantive knowledge of democratic systems and practices can lead to higher levels of civic engagement.⁷

Without doubt, as Bok contends, there is often a clear link between knowledge and action both in the study of ethics and of democratic principles, especially when good will is present and the context of application is clear and well-defined. But, equally or more often, it is obvious that the gap between knowing and doing is large, especially where learning is passive, the focus is on highly specialized issues, or students are distracted by the rapid pulse of their own lives. In most real world contexts, the enactment of values is difficult and challenging as multiple personal and cultural differences and social interests clash with one another in complex and changing contexts. An education of the powers of moral agency must address these challenges. Democratic literacy must finally show itself to be a literacy of doing and being, not simply of knowing. Like leadership, it is an enactment that depends on the unfolding of human powers. Democracy, beyond all its protocols and processes, is a form of human agency that exists only through lived commitments to the values of justice, equality, liberty, and respect. Even though collegiate leaders typically claim civic responsibility and leadership as goals of liberal education, there is often little that they

can point to in their academic programs or in the assessment of student outcomes that directly support these assertions.

Many of these points are made in the most recent periodic reports of the Association of American Colleges and Universities on contemporary liberal education, *College Learning for the New Global Century*.⁸ Building on many of the analyses and arguments of its 2002 report, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*, the Association's National Leadership Council defines a series of "essential learning outcomes"⁹ and "principles of excellence"¹⁰ as guides to achieving education of the highest quality for all of the nation's citizens.

From our perspective, the reports can be seen as a benchmark to measure the contemporary self-understanding of liberal education. The ideas that they present reflect beliefs and practices that are in evidence in many of the hundreds of member colleges of the association, in the collaborative work of campuses in a variety of demonstration projects, in a large number of case-studies and research, and in the knowledge, experience, and opinion of educators, business leaders, and policy makers who comprise the leadership council, and the earlier national panel of the *Greater Expectations* report. Once again, education is about "the full development of human talent,"¹¹ "the mastery of essential skills and capabilities,"¹² so the focus on human powers is central. Those powers include almost precisely the same capacities listed in Bok's study and are comparable to Levine's powers of the mind, though they take a different form. The report puts a heavy emphasis on the development of personal and social responsibilities, including civic knowledge and engagement, intercultural knowledge and competence, and ethical reasoning and action.¹³ The report argues consistently and vigorously that it is time to "reclaim the connections between liberal education and democratic freedom."¹⁴ It illustrates the multiple ways in which many colleges and universities are using engaged learning, focusing on the big questions of human experience, and offering students opportunities for direct involvement in service learning and field experience to give reality to democratic engagement. At the same time, it acknowledges the difficulty of moving from knowledge to action, and laments that many of these efforts "still hover on the margins of the mainstream academy."¹⁵ The preponderance of narrow vocationalism, of hyper academic specialization and fragmented curricular design are among the high hurdles that must be overcome.

For some academicians, it would be best for colleges simply to acknowledge that they cannot teach commitments to moral and civic

responsibility. As the provocative Stanley Fish, former Dean of Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago, puts it, "... it is decidedly not my job to produce citizens for a pluralistic society or for any other. Citizen-building is a legitimate democratic activity, but it is not an academic activity."¹⁶ Anything that might get in the way of commitment to truth, including the democratic value of respect for others, ought to be academically suspect. For Fish, not only is civic education a bad idea, but it is also an unworkable one. There is no way to control all the variables and influences that can affect the complex process of developing democratic responsibility.¹⁷ Few educators would subscribe fully to Fish's views, but he asks sharp questions that merit answers.

Models of Knowing and Human Powers

We have shown that the development of the fundamental powers of learning is the center of gravity in contemporary concepts of liberal education. Even as the motif provides a comprehensive rationale for liberal learning, it is not self-evident how the multiple powers of the mind can be integrated to achieve some of the larger aims of education. In the critical goals concerning ethical action and the exercise of democratic responsibility, the model is unable to give an account of how liberal education can reliably shape commitments, values, and actions. The root of the problem lies deep in the intellectual constructs and epistemologies of the academic world, at least in the West. The dominant model for knowledge is the "I think" or the "I know" in which the subject apprehends the world through the powers of reason. The cogito may be abstract in its philosophical, logical, and mathematical forms, or descriptive and empirical in its modern scientific forms, which we might call the "I describe." Yet in all cases the thinking subject distances itself from the objects of its inquiry and description. In other philosophical contexts, consider American pragmatist thought, the "I do" is privileged to give an account of truth and norms of conduct that the mind can discover through the powers of engaged reason and experience. The contemporary academic mind has much more confidence in the intellect's powers of description and analysis than in the capacity of reason to grasp metaphysical truths or create normative ethical systems. In most contexts, modern academic fields also have distanced themselves from the powers of feeling and human agency as reliable sources of knowledge. Those for whom the "I feel," (integrative, personalistic, and gestalt thinkers) the "I do," or the "I

exist" (existentialist theorists) are points of reference are always struggling to escape relegation to various forms of subjectivity. In the dominant contemporary academic orientation of the "I describe," feelings, choices, and values may be interesting phenomena to study, but not as forms of knowledge. They are seen as forms of affect or agency, rather than as methods of cognition, though many existential, integrative, and humanistic thinkers continue to argue for their normative dimensions.¹⁸ If contemporary liberal education is to fulfill its aspirations to develop the full range of human powers and educate for democracy, for values, and for leadership, it has to reconceptualize some of the foundations of its enterprise. It has to find ways to integrate the human powers of knowing and doing, of feeling and choosing, as elements of human agency and of personal and social responsibility.