

Free Life Commentary, an independent journal of comment published on the Internet: <http://www.seangabb.co.uk/flcomm/flc.htm>

Issue Number 100
9th April 2003

The Value of Education, by Sean Gabb

I went yesterday evening to a seminar arranged in London by the Social Affairs Unit. This began with a brief lecture by Theodore Dalrymple, a doctor who writes an occasional column for *The Spectator*. His theme was "The Proletarianisation of British Culture". He explained how notions of politeness and restraint were vanishing from the middle classes, being replaced by an increasing vulgarity of thought and behaviour; and that this was not a vulgarity copied from the working classes, but was part of a general decline also affecting them. It was a brief lecture, and was intended as no more than a summary of the problem. The discussion was then thrown open for others to supply answers or other pertinent comments.

These seminars, I think, have been arranged to allow free discussion in private; and so I will not report the discussion, or even say who else was there. Instead, I will give my own thoughts on the problem. I believe that much of the vulgarity of thought and behaviour can be traced to a failure throughout the English speaking world, since about 1960, to understand the meaning and value of education.

I will not presume to say what is the purpose of life. Though I wish it were otherwise, I suspect there is no objective purpose, and it is up to us as individuals to supply our own. But whatever the case, I think it reasonable to say that our purpose ought to be to make ourselves as happy as we can, and to contribute as much as we can to the general stock of happiness.

Now, happiness comes in many forms and is found in many places. If we want ecstatic pleasure, that can be found in any number of legal and illegal substances. If we want uncomprehending contentment, there are lobotomies or courses of electric shock therapy. But given that most people reading this article are at least moderately intelligent, I will not bother with criticising these kinds of happiness. For us, happiness surely includes understanding and even wisdom. This requires some

subordination of present to future objectives, and in particular getting the best education of which we are capable. I will define an educated person as someone who can hold an interesting conversation with himself throughout the whole uncertain course of his adult life—someone with a fair knowledge of human nature, a tolerance of the milder follies, an understanding of the limits of what is possible, a calm equanimity of temper, and, ideally, with a sense of humour. Some of these qualities are innate. Others must be acquired.

A person who possesses these qualities cannot fail to be an interesting and a pleasing companion to himself through life. And the existence of many such people, largely connected with each other, gives rise to what the economists call a positive externality. A country in which the tone of life is set by such a class of people is invariably a more pleasant place to be than a country where such a class does not exist. That country will be more beautiful in its arrangement of material objects, and more gentle in its courtesies. Its laws will be more humanely framed and more humanely applied. Its politics will be steadier in their course and more temperate in their ends. It will go to war less often, and then mostly for the pursuit of legitimate interests. Because of the greater security of life and property, and the greater respect for thrift and sobriety, it will also be richer and more powerful.

Such an education means a training in habits of thought and the exercise of general intellectual ability. It may require the acquisition of specific skills—for example, learning at least one of the classical languages and few modern languages, and learning some of the technical aspects of music and the visual arts. It may also require an understanding of mathematics and of the natural sciences. It certainly requires a long study of literature and history and philosophy and law and political economy. But none of this may be useful in any direct financial sense.

This is not to disparage purely technical or professional training. These are not at all to be despised. Some while ago, I took a course in bookbinding, and was filled with respect for the skill and dedication of the old man who taught me. Accountancy and legal practice and medicine and the ability to see and make use of previously undiscovered business opportunities, are all of high value. But they are not in themselves education. My instructor in bookbinding was a man of wide culture. Not only did he know how to put books together, but he also had a strong appreciation of what he was putting together. I know accountants and lawyers and physicians who can keep me happily awake until three in the morning as we discuss the state of the world. That, however, is because they are not just what they have trained to become. It is because they are also educated men.

The problem we are now facing is largely the outcome of a decline of respect for humanistic education. My dear friend Dennis O'Keeffe is famous for his denunciations of what he calls socialist education—this being a denial that there is any value in the traditional curriculum, and that the cultures of all social classes and of all racial and national groups are equally valuable; and even that ours is inferior, so far as it contains within itself at least the implicit claim to general hegemony over all others. With this goes the dangerous absurdities of structuralism and post-modernism.

Of course, Dennis is right. But it is not only Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser and Herbert Bowles and Samuel Gintis who are to blame for the attack on humanism. It is also the intellectual philistinism of our own intellectual allies. When I was a boy, I got into an argument with my mathematics teacher, an Armenian Marxist who wore jeans in class and long leather boots spray painted green—this was the 1970s. I asked him one day what was the value of the simultaneous equations he was trying to teach us how to solve. He made what I now realise was a good attempt to explain their value, but began to lose his temper when I failed to understand him. Many years later, I read of a similar exchange in Alexandria between Euclid and one of his students. Euclid, it seems, did not even try to explain himself. Instead, he told his assistant to give the man his money back and throw him into the street.

I now understand the value of knowledge that has no immediate or obvious use. Sadly, many others who call themselves libertarians or conservatives do not. With their talk of "vocational learning" and "learning based outcomes", they deny the value of any education that is not directed to the gaining of marketable skills.

I know of schools that teach information technology but not history. Again, I do not dispute the value of technical skills. I am proud of my ability to build computers and to make software work: my own website is almost entirely crafted by hand in HTML. But history also is important. An accountant who is ignorant of the French Revolution, or cannot recognise sonata form, or knows not a line of poetry, is nothing more than a skilled barbarian. In a nation where only a small minority is truly educated, legal equality becomes a hard concept to maintain, let alone political equality. In a nation without even that minority, public life must inevitably become savage and arbitrary—a thing of wild, inconstant passions, led by those unable to perceive or follow longer term goods.

That is where, I think, we are now fast approaching. We have a Prime Minister who cannot spell, and is not ashamed of the fact. We have a political class in general that lacks nearly all skill of persuasive speech and seems ignorant of the past. Of the first

Ministers appointed to serve under Tony Blair, apparently, the majority listed football as their main hobby in their Who's Who entries; and not one listed any humanistic pursuit. I doubt if the Conservatives are much better. Perhaps the Judges and permanent heads of department will soon follow the trend. Little wonder our freedoms are being given up, one at a time, to moral panics and appeals to administrative convenience.

Is there anything to be done? I am not sure that there is in the short term. It takes centuries of moral evolution to achieve the level from which we have now declined. Between the renaissance vulgarities of behaviour described by Norbert Elias to the gentility of life in the 1900s lie 500 years of gradual improvement. To suppose that the present decline can be arrested and turned round in one lifetime is perhaps too optimistic. But there are certain steps that may easily be taken towards an eventual improvement. One of the participants in the seminar last night described how he had thrown out his television set, and how this had already contributed to the moral tone of his household. There is an example to be followed—and cheaply followed, bearing in mind the decadence of broadcasting.

Aside from this, we can hope for a collapse of the universities. There are always exceptions, but most are nowadays a combination of training schools for narrow professional disciplines, and academies of falsehood. George Orwell once declared of some absurdity "you need to be an intellectual to believe that". This needs now to be amended to "You need a degree to believe that". I am not sure the universities, taken as a whole, can be reformed: better, I suspect, either to wait for their natural decline into irrelevance or to shut them down at the first opportunity. One of the first acts of the Ayatollah Khomeini after taking power in Iran was to close all the universities for three years. The bloody revolution of which this was a part is, of course, to be condemned. But I have no doubt that Shiite theology and law were much closer to the humanistic ideal than the western sociology they replaced. Perhaps historians will one day trace the growing stability and democratisation of modern Iran to this educational reform.

But as my readers may have noticed, I tend to be better at describing problems than giving solutions to them. I can only conclude by thanking the Social Affairs Unit for inviting me to so stimulating a discussion, and to hope that I shall be invited to others in future.

© Sean Gabb, 2008

If you like this article, you should download my latest book - [*Cultural Revolution, Culture War: How Conservatives Lost England, and How to Get It Back*](#). You can have this for free, or you can buy it. But you can, if you wish, just send me some money. It would really please me!

Sean Gabb, author of the above article, declares that it may be reproduced in any form, on condition that it is reproduced in full, accurately and without any distortions of meaning; and on condition that if he would under normal circumstances have been paid a fee, he shall be paid the full going rate for the work, whenever it is reproduced.