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Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters (Book Review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters. Roth, Michael S. New Haven: Yale University, 2015. (Paperback with new preface.) 248pp. ISBN: 978-0300212662. Reviewed by Walker Cosgrove, Assistant Professor of History, Dordt College.

American colleges and universities today are under fire for any number of reasons, including the cost of education, the impracticality of a college degree, the charge that good schools only service elites, and the seemingly out-of-touch faculty. In *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters*, Michael Roth, president of Wesleyan University and professor in history and the humanities, seeks to combat this backlash through a staunch defense of “liberal education.” Rightly, in my opinion, Roth is concerned about the moves many colleges and universities are now making to become, supposedly, more practical. Common examples include the trend of offering more vocational-specific degrees, a questionable choice given the number of times that the average students will change jobs and even careers before 30 years of age; “measurable outcomes” for everything, again questionable because it is impossible to measure or quantify what is truly meaningful; and the paring down of core requirements, unfortunate because in many cases these courses once defined institutions of higher education.¹ Roth wants to encourage his readers to reconsider how they think about education, instead of focusing on job or salary outcome, and to consider how education shapes and molds individuals. To that end, Roth’s book serves well as a wakeup call, reminding us of the true value and purpose of higher education.

It is important to note from the outset that Roth is no elitist who thinks Americans need to embrace an education-for-education’s sake mentality. He certainly does not propose a return to, or strengthening of, traditional art and science curricula, and I do not imagine he would recommend that most schools start Great Books programs (128, 131, 148-149). Instead, he has a nuanced idea of “liberal education,” and while he certainly connects it to the past and draws from those streams, he emphasizes the present and the future, as well as the meeting of specific, real-world needs.

The closest we get to a definition of “liberal education” comes in the introduction, when Roth writes, “Liberal education, as I use the term throughout this book, refers to the combination of the philosophical

and rhetorical traditions of how one learns as a whole person” (4-5). The rest of the book unpacks this idea of liberal education, particularly through a reflection on thinkers throughout American history. According to Roth, liberal education is important because:

In an age of seismic technological change and instantaneous information dissemination, it is more crucial than ever that we not abandon the humanistic frameworks of education in favor of narrow technical forms of teaching intended to give quick, utilitarian results. Those results are no substitute for the practice of inquiry, critique, and experience that enhances students’ ability to appreciate and understand the world around them—and to innovatively respond to it. *A reflexive, pragmatic liberal education is our best hope of preparing students to shape change and not just be victims of it* (10-11, emphasis mine).

After setting the stage with his introduction, Roth frames his argument in four chapters focused on American history. My first serious criticism of this work is this structure. While the basic chronological organization is easy enough to follow, it is not completely clear how all the various components fit together, until the last few pages of the book. The first two chapters provide a chronological examination of specific thought about liberal education in American history, from the foundation of the United States through the nineteenth century. Chapter one focuses on Thomas Jefferson, includes discussion on African-American writers David Walker and Frederick Douglass, and concludes with Ralph Waldo Emerson. Chapter two traces the Emersonian influence in W.E.B. Du Bois, Jane Addams, and William James. In the third chapter Roth examines the various controversies over liberal education throughout American history, beginning with Benjamin Franklin’s critique of Harvard and ending with current struggles. Chapter four, the book’s final chapter, emphasizes pragmatism and fostering a commitment to lifelong learning, and here John Dewey and Richard Rorty have the spotlight. There is no standalone conclusion, except for the aforementioned final seven pages, which do act somewhat as a conclusion by providing overall coherence to

the broader argument.

What makes those final pages of the book so important is that they provide the coartrack on which we can hang all the examples, individuals, institutions, and history discussed in the previous 190 pages, and thus begin to make sense of them in connection with Roth's broader argument for a liberal education. Here Roth reflects upon a lecture on liberal education that he gave in China, which was organized on the concepts of "Liberate," "Animate," "Cooperate," and "Instigate/Innovate" (191). His overall argument goes something like this: Jefferson illustrates "Liberate," in his emphasis that education should allow individuals to discover what they can/will do, as opposed to train narrowly for a specific vocation. Emerson represents "Animate" because he believed education ought to excite and encourage students to "tap into their creativity so that they can animate their world" (192). The four thinkers (Du Bois, Addams, James, and Dewey) associated with pragmatism connect with "Cooperate." The idea is that education ought to produce certain habits, especially geared toward living well together in society. Instead of studying what has no immediate use, education ought to empower and encourage students to engage and change their world; as Roth writes, "The point will be the transformation of the self and of one's culture" (47). Rorty demonstrates "Instigate/Innovate" because he suggested that liberal education ought to challenge the status quo and encourage innovation to overcome it with something better.

This is an interesting and compelling argument, but not without its faults. To begin with, my second major criticism of the work is that Roth's definition of liberal education is too fluid. True, he gives the definition I provided above, but he also seems to embrace Dewey's notion that "no disciplines [are] intrinsically part of liberal education" (193). At one point Roth refers to "an evolutionary approach to liberal education" (104), but he is not really clear who or what determines/guides that evolutionary approach, and, more importantly, how to avoid focusing too much on practical outcomes or vocational training, to me, the logical conclusion of pragmatism. Ultimately, he suggests that liberal education is pragmatic and useful. But what does this mean? Who determines the definition of practical or useful? I would guess that most administrators today would argue that vocational training is practical and useful. Thus, Roth should be clearer on how his pragmatic, liberal education is fundamentally different from the more practical, vocationally minded approaches that he critiques.

I agree with Roth's view that liberal education

ought to be about the whole person and not simply vocational training; however, he never establishes how this education ought to be conducted. This leads to my third major criticism: the scope of the book is too narrow. Roth focuses only on American conceptions of education. Yet taking a much broader view of education to consider the classical world, the medievals, or even a variety of historic Catholic approaches (the Jesuits or John Henry Newman, to cite two examples) could help him clarify what he means by certain terms or ideas such as "character formation" or "education of the whole person." The ancient world has plenty to say about these topics, the medievals gave birth to our modern colleges and universities and their curricula, the Jesuits globally established colleges and universities focused on whole-person education, and Newman's *The Idea of a University* is a vital nineteenth-century work on liberal education. One common idea uniting these other visions of education is the necessary centrality of traditional arts and sciences, in shaping persons, and thus society, at the college level.

In starting his historical focus with Jefferson, Roth omits many of the major voices regarding education in human history. His excessive focus on the practical and useful reveals that he is working out of a similar paradigm as college and university administrators who push vocational and technical education and seek to drop fundamental core classes. Roth needs to more seriously consider and engage with the deep past. G.K. Chesterton once wrote that, "Real development is not leaving things behind, as on a road, but drawing life from them as from a root,"² and to do this Roth needs to consider the millennia-long tradition of the arts and sciences as they have been handed down—the same tradition that Jefferson, Emerson, and James were immersed in. Certainly, the traditional arts and sciences are not so apparently "useful" by any pragmatic standards, but to quote poet Charles Péguy, "Homer is new this morning and nothing is so old as yesterday's newspaper."³ And in a recent book, philosopher Rebecca Newberger Goldstein suggests that philosophy is as important and useful today as it was 2400 years ago in Plato's Athens.⁴

I think that Roth and I agree that colleges and universities ought to be places where students are broadly (liberally) educated; however, we diverge on the curricula utilized to this end. Based on his notion of the "evolutionary character" of liberal education as well as the idea that no disciplines inherently fit liberal education, Roth is predisposed to the recent and current, while I would encourage traditional arts and sciences that have been "hallowed by usage and consecrated

by time,” to quote a character from the film *Miller’s Crossing*.⁵ It might be possible that the answers to our problems today lay beyond our own narrow history.

Roth does levy some thoughtful criticisms that every administrator at an institution of higher education ought to consider. For example, he is fairly dismissive of emphases on both technical and vocational programs, as well as the specialized research institution. While I do think there is a place for vocational development and specialized research, it is interesting that many small liberal arts colleges today, attempting to answer current problems, are moving away from their traditional arts and sciences roots to become either technical and vocational institutions (158, 190) or specialized research institutions where faculty no longer educate students liberally, but instead focus on their own research agenda (104).

A second poignant criticism regards student evaluations and the power they have to change the educational experience for the worse (136-137). Roth writes, “[T]he great bulk of the information [that university officials] use to determine the quality of teaching is the satisfaction of the students as expressed on surveys. In his introduction to the 2002 edition of *The Academic Revolution*, Jencks puts it this way: ‘So instead of giving students what grownups think the students need, most teaching institutions are under considerable pressure to give students what they want’” (137).

Despite my criticisms of *Beyond the University*, Roth has written an important and engaging book that speaks to some of the most important problems in higher education today. As a college president, criticizing certain trends that are particularly popular among college administrators, he shows that he swims

upstream, for which he ought to be applauded. This book ought to be required reading for any administrator considering a move to technical and vocational education, or a push towards emphasizing research and grant-winning. It is also recommended for anyone interested in knowing at least one strand of the development of higher education in American history. I hope this fine book prompts discussion across American colleges about the ultimate purpose of higher education.

Endnotes

1. Regarding the latter point, I’m thinking specifically of Notre Dame’s 10-year curriculum review’s proposal of dropping philosophy and theology requirements. See: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2015/02/17/notre-dame-is-reviewing-its-curriculum-which-could-have-far-reaching-effects/>.
2. G.K. Chesterton, *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton: Chesterton on Dickens* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 425.
3. As quoted by Charles Singleton in his translation of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. See Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: The Inferno*, translated, with a commentary, by Charles S. Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 371.
4. Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, *Plato at the Googleplex: Why Philosophy Won’t Go Away* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014).
5. *Miller’s Crossing*. DVD. Directed by Joel Coen and Ethan Coen. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1990.

To the Edge: Legality, Legitimacy, and the Responses to the 2008 Financial Crisis. Philip A. Wallach. Washington, D. C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2015. 319 pp. ISBN 978-0-8157-2623-4. Reviewed by Jack R. Van Der Slik, Professor Emeritus, Political Studies and Public Affairs, University of Illinois-Springfield.

For me, *To the Edge* is a headache to read. That is not because it is overly long. Its seven chapters are wrought in 218 pages. Nevertheless, the subject matter of corporate finance and regulation is highly complex. A plethora of laws, regulations, agency titles (with acronyms), corporate titles, and terminology from corporate and government finance litters the text. The book is about the Great Recession in the American economy that commenced in 2008 and the ways that government policy makers and regulators sought to deal with the causes and consequences of a plunging economy. The scholar addressing this inquiry, Philip Wallach, is a Princeton Ph.D. in politics,

interested in the regulatory statutes of the American administrative state. To reckon with his subject matter, the reader must penetrate the inner workings, indeed shifting sands, of the nation’s governmental and corporate bureaucracies.

Even the headline issues were difficult to understand from the onset of the economic crisis. After earlier economic tremors, in March 2008 the country’s seventh-largest investment bank, Bear Stearns, approached financial insolvency. In an elaborate arrangement primarily engineered by Henry Paulson, then Secretary of the Treasury, and Ben Bernanke, chairman of the Federal Reserve, the government provided