

T.S. Eliot on 'The Aims of Education'



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We are at a time when the advances in computer technology are providing access to a vast array of information, largely detached from any systematic framework for understanding and critical reflection. Our educational institutions at all levels are increasingly being regarded mainly as instruments of commercial values. This ranges from providing students with appropriate vocational training to the conduct of research aimed at the growth of a more successful national economy.

In relation to the latter, such developments as the Internet, other increasingly sophisticated computer hardware and software, the flow of fast jet airliners around the world, international trade and financial organizations are bringing about the profound changes in economic activity that we now commonly refer to as 'globalization'. Of course, this phenomenon is not (and could not be) restricted to the economic domain. The latter has deep, complex connections with the political, social, and cultural dimensions of human life. It may not be possible to predict how these will be affected by economic globalization, but there are bound to be significant influences and interactions.

T.S. Eliot was one of the major English-language poets of the twentieth century, and a perceptive social and literary critic. In 1950, he delivered a series of lectures at the University of Chicago under the general title 'The Aims of Education'.¹ Given the dramatic changes in our economic and social life that are affecting education, it is interesting to consider what relevance Eliot's thoughts of fifty years ago may still have for our present times.

In that period, we have been confronted by a rash of related political slogans that have consequences for the role of education: 'the learning society', 'the clever country', 'the knowledge-rich nation' and so on. Before turning to Eliot's lectures, it seems appropriate to quote some lines from one of his poems:²

The endless cycle of ideas and actions,
Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;

...

All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance.

...

Where is the Life we have lost in living?

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

In *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*,³ Eliot includes a chapter on education and culture. He relates his discussion of the aims of education to the three that are listed by C.E.M. Joad in his book *About Education*.⁴ He returns to these in his 1950 lectures. Here, I shall begin by referring briefly to some of the views he expressed in that chapter. Joad states the aims as follows:

1. To enable a boy or girl to earn his or her living.
2. To equip him to play his part as the citizen of a democracy.
3. To enable him to develop all the latent powers and faculties of his nature and so enjoy a good life.

While favourably disposed to Joad's account, Eliot has some reservations. As they stand, each aim is rather too general and is in need of some qualification. Also, there is interaction among the aims. While serving 'democracy' unqualified seems sensible in a general statement, the danger is that this opens the way for an interpretation of the political purposes of education that is radically at odds with a defensible account of democracy. To suggest that education should develop all the latent powers of a student seems rather too ambitious. A selected range is inevitable. The criterion of promoting 'a good life' raises disputed questions on just what constitutes such a life. Finally, in the face of the contemporary stress on the instrumental role of education in achieving social and economic objectives, one of the aims of education should be to promote, at least to some degree, what we refer to as wisdom (which is not the same as acquiring a lot of information—or even knowledge).

In these earlier reflections on education, Eliot draws particular attention to what he calls 'the dogma of equal opportunity'. It is, he claims, the most influential recent belief about education. (There is no doubt that it has been one of the dominant slogans in educational theory and policy over the past half-century or so.) Among the negative effects Eliot sees in the policy are that it underplays the role of the family and gives the major control of children's education to the State. This may reflect a downgrading of the family, linked with the decline of social classes—the latter, in Eliot's view, an undesirable development for the quality of a society. He does acknowledge that, in the face of contemporary socioeconomic conditions, many families are incapable of fulfilling their

educational role. So, it is handed over to the schools to do the best they can.

Using words from Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', Eliot suggests that the ideal of equality of opportunity might be appropriately called 'the mute inglorious Milton' dogma. It rests on the assumptions that superiority is always intellectual and that a method can be found for detecting it and infallibly nourishing it. Eliot wryly comments that, while we might miss out on some Miltons by not vigorously pursuing equality of opportunity, we might also miss out on some Cromwells guilty of their country's blood (not 'guiltless' as in Gray's poem).

Eliot is not opposed to enabling exceptional individuals from whatever social class to develop their capacities in order to fulfil personal and social ends. What he criticizes is the general extension of the years of universal schooling and the lowering of standards in higher education in order to ensure that a large proportion of the population is formally qualified.

He emphasizes on several occasions that 'the culture of which we are wholly conscious is never the whole of culture'.⁵ It follows that schools can deliberately transmit only a part of culture. To be successful in this task, they need the complementary support of many other agencies of culture—from families, the mass media, forms of entertainment, and so on. What has happened, he claims, is that 'Education in the modern sense implies a disintegrated society, in which it has come to be assumed that there must be one measure of education according to which everyone is educated more or less. Hence, Education has become an abstraction'.⁶ This reflects what he insists is a serious misunderstanding of culture: to suppose that it can be created or improved by a comprehensive planned effort. We need to work out and accept 'the limits of the plannable'.⁷

In the first of the 1950 lectures, Eliot addresses the question: 'Can education be defined?'. He notes how, historically, the term 'education' has changed in meaning from preparation for life in a particular social or vocational group to the nurturing of a broadly cultured person and the formation of what are taken to be generally desirable features of character.

This changed view of education faces serious problems in our increasingly pluralistic, democratic societies. What counts as desirable in the name of culture and of character are matters of serious dispute. Even when there is agreement on these ends, there are often radical differences over the appropriate means for their achievement. Eliot also points out that, given these very general objectives, there is the dangerous expectation that educational institutions should take on tasks that are properly the role of the society more generally.

He turns again to the three objectives outlined by Joad for the practice of education. Eliot emphasizes that the three—preparation for an

occupation, for one's responsibilities as a citizen, for the living of a worthwhile personal life—need to be seen as closely interrelated. The third, for example, must take account of the vocational activity in which one is to engage, and both the desirable and undesirable features of the social order in which one's life is to be lived.

Eliot again draws attention to a problem in using the general term 'democracy'. It is applied to many diverse, and not necessarily desirable, sociopolitical systems. Also, it must include more than the machinery of the political order. Otherwise, this objective of education would amount to no more than adjusting people to fit smoothly into the system. For a process to be genuinely educational, it should develop the capacities that citizens need in order to assess critically the democracy in which they live.

A general condition that affects any attempt to focus on the aims of education is the inevitable influence of background theory (however inarticulate) about the meaning and purposes of human life. It might seem desirable to begin by setting out this theory as fully and clearly as possible. But, in Eliot's view, we are not able to get very far when we inquire at this level about the purposes for which humans exist. More light is thrown on this issue when we attend to the purposes of particular activities, such as education, in which we engage as human beings. He concludes by noting that there is a plurality of answers to the question of the proper aims of education. The meaning of 'education' is inescapably elusive, a condition which he considers should not to be regretted.

This conclusion is somewhat surprising in the light of the discussion that precedes it. In any case, I think that, at the least, it is exaggerated. One can agree that we cannot present a complete and thoroughly defensible account of the basic purposes of human life, from which the purposes of particular human activities such as education are deduced. But many of the ingredients of such an account can be justified. To be consistent with them is a crucial test for any claims about the purposes of particular human activities. This applies with special force to practices, such as education, which claim to be directly serving the realization of the basic values and purposes of a worthwhile human life. This still leaves scope for legitimate debate about the aims of education and the relative weight they should be given. In addition, there is substantial room for argument and defensible disagreement on questions of the content, methods of teaching and learning, institutional organization and so on if the practice of education, given the actual characteristics of a society, is to promote effectively the values that are recognized as distinguishing what is humanly worthwhile.

In his second lecture Eliot focuses on a point to which he briefly refers in the first: the interrelationship among the aims of education (as in Joad's

list). It is one of the basic features of any defensible account of what education aims to achieve that the identified processes and outcomes interact with one another. Depending on how they are pursued, there may also be conflict among them. Eliot notes this possibility again at the end of the lecture and makes it the main subject of the one that follows.

He suggests that one of the more serious failures in not recognizing the connections among aims is the tendency to treat vocational and general education as quite separate. In this approach, the latter is likely to be regarded as having only a kind of recreational value. For a worthwhile education, the two need to be interrelated. Although this can be achieved in many different ways, the result is to enhance the meaning of each and, thus, the quality of our lives.

Joad interprets his second general aim of education—learning to participate as a citizen in a democracy—as the outcome of a program focused on the intellectual requirements. It is a matter of acquiring the knowledge that makes for a competent citizen. There is no reference to moral behaviour and feelings. Eliot rightly points out that moral values are central to the fulfilment of one's role as a citizen. Education in these values cannot be detached from the broad range of values that distinguish a morally good life. Hence, the educational aim of developing morally good citizens must be set in the context of educating the young to be morally good persons.

It is interesting to notice that Eliot, contrary to the claim that he was attracted to Fascism, affirms that 'democracy is the best form of society'.⁸ Of course, the critical issue, as he points out, is what we mean by 'democracy'. His view is that 'the essential of a democracy is that there is no total rule: for total rule means that somebody is in control of affairs about some of which he is totally incompetent'.⁹ At the same time, he is opposed to 'unqualified democracy'. There is a place for liberalism and social mobility in a sound democratic society. But, for Eliot, the latter needs the restraints of hereditary rights and strong religious beliefs.

In relation to education, a crucially important feature of his reflections on politics is his claim that political conditions (such as questions of rights, the scope of government authority) receive inordinate attention in comparison with the concern shown for the conditions that contribute to cultural wellbeing. Yet, he claims, the latter is clearly more important. He does not deny that education should contribute to our role as citizens and the understanding of related political theory. But, in his view, its more fundamental task is to foster broad cultural development. It should be examining questions of cultural continuity; of how, for example, familiarity with the past can give life to the experience of the present (which he regards as afflicted by many empty beliefs and values).

Towards the end of this lecture, Eliot returns to the point that the three aims of education (as stated by Joad) involve one another. We cannot adequately pursue any one without bringing in the others. Also, if we attend to any one of them too narrowly, this will obstruct the attainment of the others. He ends with a quotation from Simone Weil. The relevant point she is making is that ideal objectives in the abstract tend to generate undesirable side effects when put into practice. The underlying cause of this is that 'we are ourselves contradiction, being merely creatures'.¹⁰ So, 'everything that we will is contradicted by the conditions or by the consequences attached to it'. We have no alternative but to be ready to face the contradictions that arise in practice. In reference to this position, there is no doubt that educational aims can conflict with one another and do run against many obstacles in the process of being translated into practice. But Simone Weil's general view on the extent to which human intentions are frustrated in the effort to realize them seems exaggerated.

The third of the lectures addresses the issue of conflict among the aims of education. Eliot begins with a sketch of historical changes in the way education has been interpreted over the past three or four centuries. First, it referred to the training, received by a small minority, for the learned professions. Next, it came to refer to the learning thought appropriate for the class of gentlemen, together with the rudiments of literacy for the majority. In the next phase (during the nineteenth century), it applied to the program of formal learning, previously reserved for the elite, but now extended to a large proportion of the population. In the twentieth century, with the majority acquiring the basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic, attention has increasingly been given to just what constitutes being an educated person.

This question has been made more pressing by a number of developments. One has been the growing problem of illiteracy beyond the relatively basic level. As Eliot notes, it has been aggravated by the audio and visual media. Many readers give more attention to photographs and headlines than to detailed reading. Since the time of Eliot's lecture, reliance on television (and now the Internet) has seriously increased the problem. It should be added that many who do give attention to detail in reading are often deluged by information for which they lack the related content of knowledge and understanding.

Eliot also points out that questions about the appropriate scope of formal education are being driven by the increasing range of problems (and ways of resolving them) of which we are continually becoming aware. As a result, the emphasis in the provision of education, whether in an individual institution or a national system, has shifted from a kind of natural growth to deliberate planning (what he calls 'construction').

Whether those educating or being educated are aware of it or not, the practice always serves social objectives. These, Eliot argues, are now the most serious source of conflict among the aims of education. They can be at odds not only with other aims, but also with one another. Depending on the nature of the society, conscious awareness of the social objectives being pursued varies.

The growing global interaction among societies (which, particularly in economic activities and through the advances in communications technology, has developed greatly in the half-century since Eliot gave his lectures) has led to the uncritical transplanting of educational approaches from one social order to another. The tendency, Eliot suggests, is towards universal standardization in education. In this process, deliberate planning by governments is likely to displace processes of growth. For various reasons, a main one being the sharply rising cost of providing education, control is being taken more and more by the state at the highest level of government in a society.¹¹ This is a process that is much more congenial to the character of political authority in a totalitarian society. In a liberal democracy, it requires those who articulate social aims for education to examine critically the extent to which their views accord with those that are acceptable, on serious reflection, to the members of the society generally.

In the final section of this lecture, Eliot discusses the social ideal of equality of opportunity as applied to education. He wishes to illustrate how the social aims of education have to be reconciled both with one another and with other kinds of aims. As he points out, there are important differences in the interpretation of each of the key terms, 'equality' and 'opportunity'. The objective can also be defended on diverse grounds. For some, it is a matter of utility: ensuring that a society does not waste any of the ability that would enhance the prosperity of all. For others, the reason is a moral one: the just treatment of the members of a society requires that they should all have an equal opportunity to develop their capacities for education.

A serious problem in interpreting the ideal of equality of opportunity—especially when it is used mainly as a slogan—arises from the fact that it is meaningless unless we answer the question: 'opportunity for what?'. A satisfactory answer will lead us ultimately to take a stand on what we regard as the basic features of a worthwhile human life. This is the same point at which we arrive when we start with the question: 'what is the aim of education?'. More generally, when we think about education, we are led to think about citizenship. In thinking about citizenship, we are led to consider the conditions for being a good person, and so we enter the whole complex field of ethics.

Setting out the aims of education, as Joad does, has obvious advantages. But it carries the danger that the aims will be regarded as independent. A particularly serious consequence, Eliot suggests, is that moral values will be associated only with the social aim of education—the playing of one's part as a citizen of a democracy (Joad's second general aim). If this is so, the third aim—to enable each person 'to develop all the latent powers and faculties of his nature and so enjoy a good life'—will be subject to an explosive mixture of conformity to social values and complete individual freedom. In Eliot's words, it 'must lead to a suffocating uniformity of order, or of chaos'.¹²

To avoid this consequence, we need to recognize that the values by which a good citizen is defined are contained within the inclusive range of values that define a good human being—or worthwhile human life. Harmony among the aims of education (as set out, for example, by Joad) can be achieved only when these values guide every aspect of the process, whether the immediate object is the development of vocational skills or the responsibilities of citizens or the capacities that enhance the quality of personal life. In the final lecture, Eliot considers the nature of these inclusive values, by which the whole educational process is guided and which form its fundamental objective. For him, it is radically the relationship of education to religion.

Before turning to these views, I should add a concluding note to the foregoing account of Eliot's position. He quite correctly argues against a radical separation of social and personal values or the reduction of the latter to an instrument of the former. However, I do not believe that he pays sufficient attention to the complexity of the relationship in a pluralist liberal democracy. There is a range of social values to which all citizens must conform (although their reasons for doing so may vary greatly). In regard to the values that define a worthwhile personal life, there is much more scope for diversity within such a society. This is not to deny that there are such values, closely related to the social, by which all individuals would be expected to guide their lives. But a liberal democracy tolerates considerable difference on what individuals see as the values required for a personal worthwhile life. Eliot does not seem to allow sufficient scope for diversity of values in the predominantly private spheres of human existence.

Eliot begins his final lecture on 'The Aims of Education' by reiterating the reciprocal relationship between education for citizenship and personal human development. As I have just noted, this is a clearly defensible claim as long as it is recognized that in a liberal democracy the values of citizenship allow for considerable diversity in the comprehensive ideals of a good life that members of the society may pursue.

At the basis of the more immediate answer we give to the question 'what are the aims of education?' there lies, as Eliot correctly notes, the answer we give to the question 'what is Man?'. In attempting to deal with the latter question, we have to enter complex philosophical territory. But Eliot also claims that any effort at a satisfactory answer must involve theology (or religion) —the most basic perspective of all. Its part in answering the general question of what it is to be human is inescapable, even for those who reject religion and insist that their response contains no religious ingredient. Moreover, in Eliot's view, differing responses to the question ultimately reflect religious differences.

Eliot's position here seems, in effect, to be that the most basic level at which the question 'what is Man?' can be answered is, by definition, that of religion. There is no room for argument. As he comments, 'there will be some sort of religious attitude—even if you call it a nonreligious attitude—implied in your answer'.¹³ But defensible answers can be given to the question of the essential values that mark a worthwhile human life without including any that are distinctively religious or appealing to a distinctively religious justification. To deny this, as Eliot does, begs the question. He is simply asserting that any metaphysical or other philosophical interpretation of the ingredients of a worthwhile human life necessarily contains a religious dimension.

To come back to the topic of religion and education: Eliot notes that the question commonly addressed concerns the place of religion in the process of education. For him, the more fundamental question is the place of education in religion.

On the first question, Eliot distinguishes the main ways in which religion would be a subject of formal education depending on the political and religious character of a society. He points out that, given a society in which there is a diversity of religions or of sects within a common religion, one or another compromise must be adopted on the teaching of religion as part of formal education. The response in these circumstances is likely to affect institutional arrangements as well as the curriculum.

What Eliot ignores is the fact that, at the time of his lectures, there was already a substantial number of people in Western democracies (to which he is mainly referring) who did not accept any religion at all. Thus, the question of teaching religion in common schools was rather more complex than he supposes.

While it would not satisfy Eliot, I believe there is a strong case to be made for the inclusion in all our schools of teaching about religion—especially its historical influence on our present culture, social order, and moral values. It would also be desirable to include some comparative study of the place that religions have had in other cultures.

The second question—the place of education in religion—is more fundamental for Eliot because, as we have seen, he regards the way in which human life is to be understood (the most basic issue for the theory and practice of education) as ultimately requiring a religious response. Whether or not one agrees with Eliot on the necessity and primacy of a religious perspective for a satisfactory theory of education, I believe that he does make an important point on the relationship between the theory and practice of education. He notes that, even if there were complete agreement at the philosophical and theological levels about the nature and purposes of education, many detailed questions about the practice of education would remain unanswered or in dispute.

Eliot's final general comment on aims of education is the importance of avoiding an interpretation that focuses exclusively on present circumstances. 'It should be an aim of education to maintain the continuity of our culture—and neither continuity, nor a respect for the past, implies standing still. More than ever, we should look to education today to preserve us from the error of pure contemporaneity.'¹⁴ In the face of the present decline in the study of history and the historical dimension of other fields of study, special attention needs to be given to the role of education in fostering a critical awareness of human culture (and particularly that of our own society) from the past to the present, and the trends of movement into the future.

In this lecture, Eliot takes the view that, if we have to choose, then the mix of a highly educated minority along with the majority educated to a rudimentary level is preferable to having everyone receive an inferior quality of education. But he suggests that the objective should be to develop the broad historical knowledge referred to in the previous paragraph in as many members of the society as are capable of completing the higher levels of general education. I think it would be preferable to set as the aim the attainment by every student of the fullest grasp of this historical knowledge that is within his or her capacity.

Eliot concludes his lectures on 'The Aims of Education' by noting that 'education', while it can be given a generally accepted descriptive dictionary meaning, is basically a normative concept. The issue is not what practices are referred to as 'education', but what should be. As a normative concept, it is deeply contested. Agreement in theory often goes with disagreement over practice; there are diverse emphases even when the ingredients of practice are the same, and so on.

In his discussion of Eliot's 'The Aims of Education', G.H. Bantock makes a number of sound critical comments (in addition to highlighting the merits of Eliot's position).¹⁵ He notes, for example, that, while Eliot emphasizes that education for the sake of understanding and appreciating

important aspects of culture is beyond the capacities and interests of the majority, he leaves unanswered the question of what form of education is most appropriate for the latter in the conditions of a contemporary industrial society.

Perhaps the most important criticism Bantock makes concerns the unreality of the emphasis Eliot places on the role of Christianity and of social classes among the educative influences in our present society. Although with some exaggeration, Bantock points out that 'Christianity is no longer a living force among the bulk of the population, and the trend of current theorizing is directly opposed to the perpetuation of anything approaching a class system, whatever the logic of events and the necessities of the social structure may impose. Furthermore, the unity that is imposed tends to be mechanical rather than organic; it stems from treating man as an abstraction.'¹⁶

We have now reached a time when the question of the ends that education should serve is widely viewed with boredom, if not derision. It has become accepted as an almost self-evident truth that the whole purpose of education is to advance the economic prosperity of individuals and the society. A recent article suggests that over the past few decades education has come to be seen as not distinct from training in remunerable skills, but as the same thing. The article sums up the position of Britain's Charter of Higher Education (1993) in the following way: 'Education is directly, practically useful. It's an investment. It is necessary—essential for regional growth and national wealth creation. It promotes—facilitates—enhances the national economy and the skilled—highly skilled workforce needed by the labour markets of the information—global economy'.¹⁷

Although Eliot's 'The Aims of Education' is a summary treatment of the topic and open to some serious criticism, he, nevertheless, perceived in 1950 the trend to the economic-instrumental interpretation that has now come to dominate. His comments highlight the far greater complexity and significance of the objectives that the practice of education should serve in the individual and communal life of human beings.

NOTES

1. The lectures are published in T.S. Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970, pp.61-124.
2. From the first stanza from 'Chorus from "The Rock"', T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1952, p.96.

3. T.S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (containing *The Idea of a Christian Society and Notes towards the Definition of Culture*), New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1949, Ch. 6.
4. C.E.M. Joad, *About Education*, London: Faber and Faber, 1945.
5. *E.g. Christianity and Culture*, p.184.
6. *Ibid.*, p.182.
7. *Ibid.*, p.186.
8. *To Criticize the Critic*, p.86.
9. *Loc. cit.*
10. *To Criticize the Critic*, p.91. In the following sentence, the second quotation from Weil is also on p.91.
11. This trend has continued through the past fifty years. While the cost of education is still a key basis for government control, the instrumental value that education is considered to have in an economy heavily dependent on computer technology is a more powerful reason for government intervention. The article referred to in Note 17 below emphasizes this point.
12. *To Criticize the Critic*, p.106.
13. *Ibid.*, p.109.
14. *Ibid.*, p.119.
15. G.H. Bantock, *T.S. Eliot and Education*, London: Faber and Faber, 1970.
16. Bantock, *op. cit.*, p.113.
17. Duke Maskell, 'Course beyond the great unknowing', *Higher Education*, *The Australian*, 18 Oct., 2000, p.31.