does. It is intentionally to confront questions having to do with the good and right, to imagine alternative possibilities, to strive for an authentic way of speaking and being. I believe that a reflexive engagement with the modes of expression and communication that give rise to the liberal learning cannot but enrich — and, in Paulo Freire's sense of the word, "humanize."[11] It *makes a difference* to experience for oneself the "whiteness of the whale," to investigate the history of children in this country in response to one's particular question, to feel Michelangelo's Captives struggle out of their rock. It expands one's universe to hear Kierkegaard's stern and ironic voice, to greet the seasons with Vivaldi, to apprehend the fragmented gestures in the mad scene in *Giselle*. It entails an almost muscular effort to find one's way through Hegel's system of thought, to look through Marx's narrowed eyes at the world around, to feel the cutting edge of a Chopin prelude, to attend still again to Eisenstein's Odessa steps. None of these experiences, as I have suggested, is "natural." They are made possible through instruction, through a revealing of the common world.

Schoolpeople, most especially, have to take responsibility for creating situations in which young persons will be enabled to connect what they are learning to the search "anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life."[12] This is the search that prepares an individual to discover his/her own vision, his/her own voice. But it cannot be successfully undertaken if there is no grasp of a heritage, a tradition, if there is no liberal learning to launch the newcomer on his/her quest.

The times are nondescript; in many ways they are despairing. In education, however, we deal with new beginnings. There are risks, but there is always a degree of hope.

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2. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Present* (New York: Viking Press, 1961), p. 196.
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4. Paul H. Hirst, "Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge," in R. F. Dearden, P. H. Hirst, and R. S. Peters, eds., *Education and Reason*, Part 3 of *Education and the Development of Reason* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 18.
5. Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, quoted in Hirst, op. cit., p. 24.
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9. E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (New York: Pantheon, 1965), p. 39.
10. Hannah Arendt, "Civil Disobedience," op. cit., p. 88.
11. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), pp. 27, 28.
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The Dynamics of Decline:
Why Education Can No Longer Be Liberal

by Robert McClintock

American society has, in its increasing specialization, left no room for whole persons to participate fully in public life. There is no one left, argues Mr. McClintock, for whom a liberal education is appropriate.

Gibbon's story of the decline and fall of Rome spanned some thousand years or more, the moral being that decline is slow. Occasionally it is convulsive, but rarely is it clear-cut. Decline differs from collapse. Decline occurs incrementally and consists in marginal changes that are often difficult to detect. Decline should not be equated with shrinkage, a mere diminution in size or prevalence; the former athlete, now lethargic and obese, is in decline as surely as the withered widower. Decline describes a condition, and condition has to do with the capacity of something to accomplish its purpose. As something declines it gets out of condition; the sinews slacken, the muscles weaken, the reactions slow, the coordination falters. The whole being still functions, but without clear purpose and with decreased vigor, stamina, and effect.

In any decline a complex interplay of internal and external causes are at work. If we think of decline as an inevitable stage in any life cycle, we are likely to accentuate the internal causes, the ineluctable aging of the organism. But if we think ecologically, we can see better the role of external causes: Year by year, far, far away, polar ice starts to build; the usual paths of high-up jet streams shift; rainfall patterns change; the water table subsides and with it the supply of a necessary nutrient marginally decreases; competitors, less dependent on that nutrient, wax and put pressure on the available space; reproduction slows; the individual life span shortens; a once-dominant tree cover thus declines and gives way to scrub and grass.

When we speak of the decline of liberal education, we speak of decline in the two senses introduced here: Liberal education has declined in its capacity to perform the purpose proper to it, and this decline has come about from a mounting, adverse pressure in the civic ecology. And if the dynamic of this double decline cannot be reversed, we foretell the fall of liberal education; we list it as an endangered species.

To begin, let us reflect on the first dynamic, examining the human purpose properly served by liberal education. As

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with the former athlete who is no longer in training for his sport, liberal education has set into decline because the purpose it serves, when in shape, has become increasingly absent in the present-day milieu. To chart the whole story, spanning millenia, attending accurately to the complexities and ambiguities, chronicling every renaissance and retrogression, would require volumes and obscure the situation with excessive detail. We try instead to grasp the fundamentals, to find, as it were, the ideal type of liberal education and to uncover its root purpose, which we do by returning to the historic origin of liberal education.

As far as we can trace, that origin occurred among the classical Greeks. The Greeks who counted, whether they were the many or the few, lived in participatory polities, and the educational aim of their *paideia*, hallowed by Homer, was the pursuit of excellence in autonomous action, to become effective as a speaker of words and a doer of deeds in the polity of one's peers. Greek educational theory emerged as successive seers reflected on how best to achieve excellence in autonomous action, the highest *arete*, and in so doing they developed an education, eventually to be called liberal, to serve as a preparation for full participation in their polities.

In doing that, however, they were at first simply dealing, as best they could, with their perceived problems and possibilities; they were not consciously preparing for posterity a pedagogical program under the rubric of liberal education. It was late in the process that the prototype of that term was hit upon when Aristotle explicitly discriminated between liberal education and other forms of education. He simply observed and made conscious the implicit assumption in the whole Greek effort: namely, that there were studies peculiarly worthy of free men. Being studies appropriate to free men, they were to be called liberal. With such observations, the determinative principle, the source, the human purpose of liberal education became conscious and explicit: Liberal education was simply that education that would be fully appropriate for the free man.

It is not necessary here to enter into how Aristotle, in defining the purpose of liberal education, denigrated other forms of education. Aristotle's distaste for the mechanical arts is irrelevant to his case for the liberal arts, and the invidious comparison of the two has all too often diverted educational theory into fruitless trivialities. Liberal education, as the Greeks developed it, had an explicit and specific human purpose. Within the Greek experience about which Aristotle reflected certain people were free. These were the citizens, those who, by virtue of their autonomous participation in common enterprises, were the *polis*. Aristotle, along with others, addressed the question: What education will be most appropriate for free, autonomous persons? The education described in answer to that question was called a *liberal* education because it was an education suitable for free men, one occasioned by the citizen's freedom, one designed for the citizen's freedom.

"As civic autonomy declines, a once-liberal education does not fade out; rather, it is sought and propounded all the more self-consciously. . . ."

For our purposes, we need not enter into details of the pedagogical program Aristotle, or anyone else, commended as liberal. From an elementary specification of the purpose assigned to liberal education, whatever its program, we can immediately deduce something important about the character of any decline in liberal education. Here we distinguish between decline and change — an important distinction, for many who decry decline in truth describe but change. In different times and places, different modes of educating can properly be deemed liberal; as conditions change, reasonable people can find very different pedagogical programs to be soundly designed to serve well the free citizen, the autonomous participant in the polity. Changes from one such mode to another would be simply changes in liberal education, not declines in liberal education, however much proponents of a pedagogical *status quo ante* might deprecate the change as decline. A real decline of liberal education can result only as the purpose that one or another variant of it was designed to serve falls into disuse. A decline of liberal education results from a decline in the freedom and autonomy enjoyed by the persons who receive the education, not from a change in the mode of the education they receive.

This observation helps us deal with a major historical problem in interpreting the decline of liberal education: namely, that the apparatus for delivering an education that has once been deemed liberal is often quite elaborate and widespread precisely in those times when liberal education is judged to be in grave decline. Again the ancients give us the inevitable examples — the Alexandrianism rife in the Hellenistic empires and the imperial Roman support of state schools of grammar and rhetoric as training mechanisms for feckless functionaries. In such times the once-liberal studies were widely studied and in sore decline, and we can see now that such a situation presents no paradox: The decline resulted, not from a retrogression in the education delivered, but from a transformation of the civic status of the people to whom it was delivered. The upshot is simply that liberal education can be liberal only where and insofar as there are free men that it can serve.

Where people no longer possess the kind of freedom they were presumed to possess in the design of liberal education, that form of education will have no real purpose to serve. Insofar as people try nevertheless to provide a liberal education, they will be using it for purposes other than the one proper to it, like a knife used to drive screws, and in the process it will become dulled and twisted, so that, when the occasion arises for it to serve its real purpose, it will do the job badly. As civic autonomy declines, a once-liberal education does not fade out; rather, it is sought and propounded all the more self-consciously, precisely because people recognize it as the education that once suited free men, and, doubting their status as free men, they seek it as compensation, as a hollow assurance, making the mastery of the liberal studies a badge slavishly certifying in a world of appearance the presence of an autonomous person. Repeatedly, that has been the fate of liberal education.

Let us look more closely at the civic autonomy integral to the purpose of liberal education. In doing so it is important not to dwell on the abuses inherent in the conditions of ancient Greek existence. The Greek *polis* at its most democratic was highly elitist. Among the Greeks the autonomy of a few was a function of the dependence of many. We recognize that as a serious limitation of the Greeks, a limitation which means that they cannot in any way stand as a golden age, a return to which we can nostalgically seek. Yet, despite the limits of their achievement, they set before posterity enduring aspirations, which serve as inspiration to us, defining certain conditions that they only partially attained, conditions that we seek to attain more fully, to universalize. One of these was their ideal of civic autonomy.

To be a citizen was not to be a member of a *polis*, a reified, self-subsistent entity; it was rather to be a participant in the

polis, a common enterprise that existed only in, by, and through the actions of those who participated in it. As Aristotle put it, the *polis* was an association for the pursuit of the good life; as such it was not much like what we know as a state, a government, an organization; it was first and foremost something that we would recognize as an *involvement*, a thoroughgoing involvement, in which the basic quality of life each experienced was felt to be continuously at stake. To be a citizen was to be involved with others in the shared effort to live well.

An involved person makes a thoroughly unspecialized but highly engaged commitment. When involved, one is ready to put out whatever one can as best one can for the sake of that in which one is involved, for when involved one is not simply performing a part but participating in the whole with the whole of one's being. Thus, when one is involved in an unfolding enterprise, one cannot passively anticipate the activities one may be expected to perform; rather, one will seek to perform diverse activities according to one's sense of the situation of the involvement, and as a participant, as someone involved, one will have to make sound judgments about an even greater diversity of activities, about the totality of activities pertinent to the enterprise. This task of self-definition with respect to the whole, this thoroughgoing involvement, was the freedom of the free man, the autonomy of the autonomous citizen. The noncitizen had no task of self-definition; he was accepted as a dependent of the *polis*, expected to perform the roles assigned to his position. The dependence of the dependent person was derived from the ascription of an identifiable, defined set of functions to him; the *arete* of the dependent person was limited to his skill in the performance of those ascribed functions. The autonomy of the autonomous citizen, however, arose from his independent involvement in the overall enterprise; and the *arete* of the free man was the excellence of his overall participation, measured extensively by the sum of his capacities, and intensively by the quality of his total contribution to the common life.

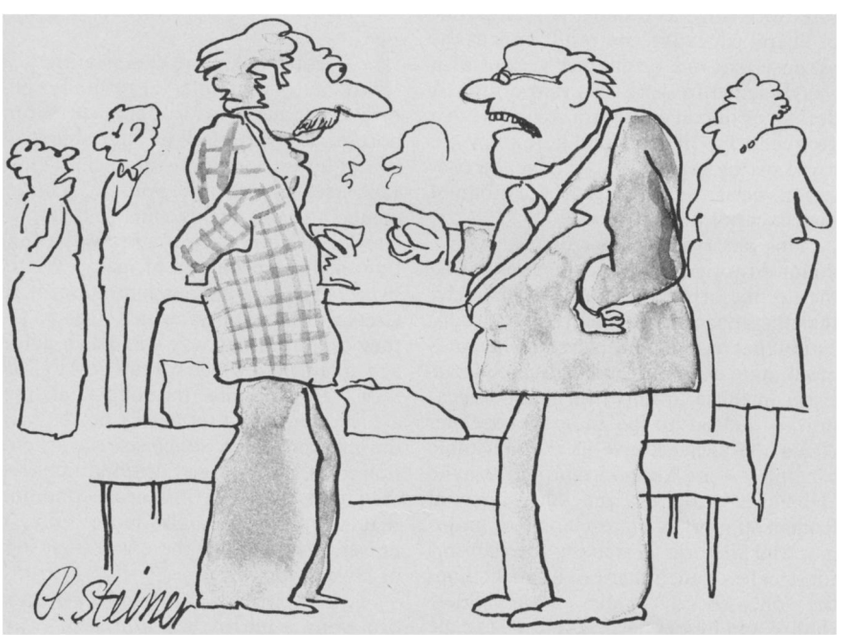
A liberal education, an education suited to such a free man, had therefore to be a complete education, an education of the whole man. The Homeric formula, seemingly so vague, bringing the youth up to be a speaker of words and a doer of deeds, reveals its concrete import in its very vagueness: The involved participant must be ready to articulate sound judgment on all matters and to act effectively in every occasion. Hence the liberal studies that eventually were worked out as studies worthy of free men were a program designed with the aspiration, not to prepare dependent persons for performing their particular functions, but to empower autonomous participants to think critically about the full range of human activity and to judge soundly any and all efforts at action. An education that so empowered the person would be a liberal education, one suited to the free man, the involved participant in the common pursuit of the good life.

One further point needs to be made about the ancient idea: Magic is a recurrent temptation. The better Greek educators were careful not to invest education with magical, transformative powers; Socrates was no moral stud, only a midwife, and Plato carefully asserted that educators could not, contrary to some claims, "put true knowledge into a soul that does not possess it, as if they were inserting vision into blind eyes." Freedom was the starting point; from there "the blame is his who chooses." Hence, for the Greeks, the purpose of liberal education was to suit free men, not to make men free. To them, the free man, the citizen, was such by birth; education neither conferred nor certified status but rather the reverse; the free status created the human situation with respect to which there arose an educative purpose for liberal studies. Because certain men were free, they sought an education that suited their status as autonomous citizens. A certain education would not magically create involvement; rather, out of involvement there ineluctably grew the perceived need for a certain education. Thus Aristotle spoke precisely when he described the liberal studies as those that suit free men. When people find that their status as autonomous, participating citizens has declined, when citizens have become subjects, then they are prone to turn to education in the desperate hope that it will somehow confer on them a freedom they no longer inalienably possess.

Where the participating citizen is in decline, there too liberal education will be in decline. That is the first dynamic of decline, the proposition about purpose. Unless people approach education in full awareness of their prior freedom, seeking to conduct their lives completely involved as autonomous participants in a common enterprise, there will be no purpose for liberal education, whatever its program. And unless sought in this spirit, any program of education, no matter how universally it is deemed liberal, will properly be qualified as something else — technical, ornamental, professional, consolational, vocational, spiritual, rational, literary, scientific, what have you.

Hence the first dynamic of decline, the one of purpose, leads us to reflect upon the second dynamic, the ecological. We must ask whether, in our civic environment, adverse pressures have developed that tend to convert the autonomous citizen into a dependent subject, transforming involvement in the whole civic enterprise into a preoccupation with limited, defined functions. For present-day Americans such an inquiry will reveal serious limitations to their status as citizens, at least in the classic sense, limitations so serious that they lead to the conclusion that liberal education has fallen into irreversible decline.

Our political heritage is one likely to induce complacency in this matter. We



"If you ask me, Buster, you're just a little too *literate for your own good."*

define ourselves as the bastion of the "free world." Our founding principles are a great summation of the civic humanism and classical republicanism that trace directly back to the Greek ideal of the citizen. Despite imperfections, our governmental practices are nevertheless unusually democratic; despite imperfections, our legal provisions for civil liberties and the protection of minority rights are nevertheless unusually secure. Yet there are problems of scale and complexity that greatly complicate the situation. However much we are, in the best sense, citizens in principle, many — perhaps all of us — may have become subjects in the actual situations of our lives.

Assemblies of real participants have become rare. The problem is not easily remedied, for it is not easily faced directly; the problem is not simply one of rights unduly subverted by the malevolent, a problem that would permit the autonomous citizen full involvement by engaging in a common enterprise to resist. It is no accident that assemblies of real participants are most approximated now among those who recognize themselves to be wronged. Engaging together to right the wrong, they find among other things that diverse programs of education can indeed be liberal. But for most, the problem in the civic ecology is less clear-cut, and it becomes very difficult to find a point of engagement, an opening for full involvement; the whole appears to be nothing but parts.

Here we meet the oft-noted problem of specialization, and perhaps we shall find it possible to grasp more clearly why specialization is now a mortal threat to liberal education. Specialization as such is not necessarily adverse to liberal education, and certainly specialization within education is not contrary to liberal education. To be sure, Aristotle held that the person seeking an education worthy of free men would choose cautiously what he would study to the point of thorough mastery; but the pursuit of such mastery in the right matters was not in itself a threat. The specialization that has become a problem is not specialization *in education*, but the particular kind of specialization that has become prevalent, near omnipresent, *in public life.*

To set the context for grasping the problem of specialization, let us note an important transformation. There has been, potentially, a great gain for civic autonomy since the ancient Greeks. For them, most economic activity was basically irrelevant to the civic enterprise of the *polis.* The modern possibility of universalizing their ideal of citizenship has resulted, more than we realize, from the conversion of economic activity into a form of public activity, from the integration of it into the civic pursuit of the good life. The ancient Greeks, who had so much to say about politics, had almost nothing to say about economics. The reason was simple: They experienced economic activity as a domestic, household activity; and people experienced economic activity thus, as a rule, well into the eighteenth century.

"Where the participating citizen is in decline, there too liberal education will be in decline. That is the first dynamic of decline. . . ."

Then the locus of production began to shift perceptibly from the household to the public domain. This perceptible shift made it possible to redefine the limits of citizenship, of potential participation. For the Greeks, and most everyone up to modern times, the status of citizen, the person fully involved in the common enterprise of the polity, had to be restricted to the leisured, those whose energies were not harnessed full time in economic activity, simply because they perceived economic activity as domestic, not civic, and could not therefore perceive the pursuit of it as part of the common enterprise of the polity. As people ceased to perceive economic activity as a domestic matter and saw it to be civic, a part of the common enterprise of the polity, they found it increasingly reasonable to universalize the ideal of citizenship, for then the producer could be perceived as participating in public life as fully as anyone else.

As this integration of productive labor into the field of public participation occurred, bringing with it the universalization of citizenship, another, related development took place, however, that has greatly restricted the opportunity for civic autonomy, for full involvement in the totality, open to the extended citizenry. The practice of systematically rationalizing publicly significant functions spread throughout the civic domain and transformed participation. The systematic rationalization of functions makes possible industrial economies, administrative states, compulsory schools, mass communications and transport — the entire material foundation of modern life. By the same token it converts people into performers who find integral involvement of the whole of their powers inconsistent with the roles they have been assigned. This is the unparalleled specialization in public life that, owing to its inherent, abstract character, is the mortal threat to liberal education.

At first the systematic rationalization of functions appears to have been a sustained, incredibly complicated extension of the division of labor. It has been that, but as a mere extension of the division of labor, however sustained and complicated, it would probably have little import for civic autonomy. It has, however, been more than an extension of the division of labor. First, it has been a division, not merely of labor, but of the entire sphere of publicly significant activity; and second, it has been an elaboration of an *authoritative* and *abstract* division of activity, one that has profoundly affected actual civic status.

An abstract division of activity organizes, not people, but functions. Politics in the classical sense was a continuous effort to organize people, participating citizens, in the shared pursuit of the good life. The operative constraint in traditional political theory was one of taking integral human character into account, a constraint pre-eminently manifest in *The Federalist Papers* and succinctly stated by Rousseau in the opening sentence of the *Social Contract*, expressing his purpose to inquire whether there can be a legitimate principle of government, "*taking men as they are* and laws as they might be." The division of activity that has become so prevalent since the late eighteenth century does not start by taking men as they are; it does not start with people at all, but rather with the functions that appear requisite on rational analysis of the activity to be performed. These functions are enumerated, described in detail, and organized into a hierarchical system of control. Only then do people enter the picture, not as persons, but as sundered embodiments of human labor and human capital, skilled specters to man the machine. Pervading the whole undertaking is reasoning analogous to the canon law ploy by which the Church avoided the embarrassment of having to take men as they are in order to make of them vicars of Christ: The sinning priest can administer a valid sacrament provided that in doing so he follows strictly the procedures of his office, for the sacrament is an act of the office, not of the man.

An abstract division of activity radically undermines the involvement that is characteristic of the civic autonomy essential to liberal education. Insofar as a person accepts an abstractly defined function, agreeing to judge and act according to the specified rights and duties, powers and responsibilities, regardless of personal abilities, aspirations, or convictions, that person can be at best but partly involved, a limited participant, one no longer fully

autonomous in thought or action.

Note the qualification, "insofar as a person accepts." Unarmed prophets did not suffice to institute the rational systematization of functions. On being introduced, abstract divisions of activity encountered tremendous resistances: Men working do not take spontaneously to factory discipline; men governing chafe at the constraints of official procedure; men thinking weary of the limits of disciplinary conventions. The modern extension of an abstract division of activity would simply not have been possible if ways had not developed to make it not only abstract but equally authoritative.

How the abstract division of activity became authoritative is an extremely complicated story. It is part and parcel of the whole process by which the rule of law, an impersonal law — what Max Weber analyzed as legal legitimacy — became established in modern societies. When innovators introduced an abstract division of activity and encountered resistance, they, not the resisters, usually won the backing of the law, for the systematic rationalization of functions, however limiting to persons, appeared nevertheless objectively legal, and more than that, pre-eminently legal, for like law itself the abstract division of activity is impersonal.

Such processes established the letter of authoritativeness; more palpable forces drove its spirit. The abstract division was prodigiously productive, and there emerged a fruitful symbiosis between it and two increasingly powerful means of sanction, the market and the state. Both are creatures of abstraction, and both manipulate reward and regulation to cajole and compel persons to conduct their lives in conformity with the abstractly rationalized functions that are the workings of the system. Neither the market nor the state, in contemporary form, could function at all without thorough reliance on the abstract division of activity that they so powerfully enforce.

Whatever our putative principles of government, the civic domain within which we think and act is one organized by an abstract division of activity, a division authoritatively sanctioned by the market and the state. This civic domain has been constructed by excluding from it the autonomous participation, the full involvement by the integral person, that gives rise to the purpose of liberal education. One can function within the domain of abstractly defined activity only by accepting limitations inconsistent with one's integrity as a free person, and there are very few interstices where one can function at all without functioning within the domain of abstraction. Abstract divisions of activity have become authoritative in almost every niche of life — in schools, universities, philanthropies, civic organizations, farms, factories, unions, corporate offices, advertising agencies, public bureaucracies, publishing houses, law offices, churches, courts, and clubs. In this civic environment one does not participate fully, autonomously, unreservedly, in anything; rather than participate, one performs a particular function within one or another hierarchy of abstractly defined activity.

In such a civic environment there is no purpose for liberal education, for an education worthy of free persons, for the simple reason that there is no place for free persons, for citizens in the full sense who engage together, integrally involved in the pursuit of common purposes. An abstract division of activity has been successfully imposed upon public life. In acting within it, the whole person does not participate, for each is subject to the limitations of his or her office, his or her job, his or her function. With no alternative to participate, with no alternative but to perform, people are no longer free persons; and with no free persons, there is no one for whom a liberal education might be appropriate. What passes for liberal education in this civic environment is a sad vestige, and a renaissance of the real thing will be possible only with a profound change in the way people conduct their lives, somehow renewing their capacity for complete, integral involvement in the pursuit of the commonweal. □

The Brightest and the Best

by Harry S. Broudy

***What is good higher education? And what is good higher education* good for?**
To provide a context for what we know, Mr. Broudy suggests, to build a reservoir of resources.

The ideal of a liberal education is about as difficult to forget as it is to achieve. Although the seed of the American college and university, it is now something of a nuisance to both the academic custodians of the scholarly disciplines and the professional schools. However, they tolerate the liberal arts college as a source of students and as a supplier of service courses preliminary to advanced work in their own departments.

Advocates of liberal studies, for their part, have tried to dissociate themselves from the pedantry of professional scholars in the disciplines and from the vocationalism of the professional schools, only to be faulted for intellectual shallowness by the former and irrelevance by the latter. With the disciplines, liberal arts share respect for the intrinsic value of knowledge; with the professional schools they share the realization that the problems of life, whether individual or social, call for multi- and interdisciplinary thinking. The tensions within this troika can be discerned in their response to two questions: What is good chemistry or history or literary criticism? What is good chemistry, history, or literary criticism *good for*?

The difference between the import of these two questions and the criteria for acceptable answers is the root problem of

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