

The Evolution of the Idea of Reason and its educational consequence

Anyone educated in any way in the classics, whether of our own language or of the ancient world, must ever since have had the uneasy recognition that ideas are not what they used to be - to put it pretty cautiously. Universal truth was once a powerful notion, yet who uses it now? Even reason no longer enjoys its once unchallenged status in universities and schools - which is not to say that it does not permeate the atmosphere of those places. Smith asks whether education is able, through reason, to do more than adjust us to the status quo. Answering that question, he outlines the manner in which reason, interpreted as the "force of the better argument," may be used to liberate us, as of course education should.

It is often argued, especially by philosophers, that the essence of man is reason. Reason, said Aristotle, is what distinguishes human beings from beasts and is the source of all properly human activity. Following this line of thinking philosophers of education have maintained that reason is the essence of education, that education uses reason to promote reason and in the process contributes to the development of both the individual and society. On its face this seems rather straight-forward. It represents the best of the humanistic and democratic tradition. An education in reason is nothing short of an education in becoming human. Unfortunately, we have some very abstract concepts here. Not only is it difficult to understand in concrete terms precisely what is involved in an education in reason, but the idea itself has changed and continues to change with circumstances. It is these changes that I wish to explore, ultimately for the sake of judging whether or not they have been for the better.

In classical thought reason was conceived as an objective and universal perspective on the truth. It was a way of

transcending the particulars of one's life, those things such as feelings, desires, and the idiosyncracies of culture that distort or bias understanding. To be lacking in reason was to be a slave, and to be a slave was to be oppressed and, therefore, unfree. By itself knowledge could not save one from this fate. Knowledge was seen primarily as a means to an end, as a necessary but not a sufficient condition for citizenship. One could know everything there was to know and still be a slave. To be free was to control your own destiny, to be master of your own ship. Of equal or greater importance than knowledge was the ability to see things from a perspective larger than your own.

This is the power of reason. Technically speaking, my reason is not really **my** reason. That is, within the classical tradition my reason is not created or defined by me. It is not, in this sense, subjective. It is a mode of understanding that I may choose to occupy or not occupy. But once in that mode I am more or less carried along objectively towards an objective outcome. It is rather like traveling on a modern day super-highway. Whether I get on or off is pretty much up to me. But once committed to the route, I am taken in a predetermined way towards a predetermined destination.

Classical truth

It is important to recognize that this conception of reason was not espoused out of the blue. Given classical metaphysics it makes perfect sense. Reason is a function of truth and is usually presented as the best way of knowing or getting at the truth. However truth is conceived, reason must give us access to it; that is the point of reason. In the classical tradition truth was conceived, quite understandably, as objective. That was the common sense view, and it still is. Whatever is true is independent of what we think, what we feel, or what we would like; at least this is what we often find when we get out into the world. Not that there is never a correspondence, but that there seems to be no necessary correspondence. And this is enough to convince most of us that correspondence, when it occurs, is no more than a happy coincidence and that truth itself always exists on its own, that is to say "objectively".

Obviously this common sense view is opened to telling criticisms. But even if it were acceptable, classical thinkers extended it to include another view that is far from common sense, and that nowadays is repudiated even by most philosophers; that is, the idea that truth is universal. Remember, we are talking here about truth in a substantive sense, not just in a formal sense, truth with a capital "T", as William James used to say. Classical thinkers reasoned that if truth is objective, it does not change; and if it does not change, it must be universal, that is, absolute. Thus, objectivity was tied by implication to universality. It was assumed that

unless truth was universal it could not be objective, and that since it was objective it must be universal, and that this all had the certainty of cold, rigorous logic. Now we can see why reason was conceived as an objective and universal perspective on the truth. Because truth itself was conceived as objective and universal. And since reason was regarded as the best way of knowing or getting at the truth, reason had to represent an objective and universal perspective.

Reason becomes subjective

All of this was very carefully and reasonably worked out when all of a sudden, it is hard to say exactly when, perhaps sometime during the Middle Ages, the world began to change. People started to travel more, to explore more, to trade more, to go to war more - in short, to live more in the world of sensible experience. Ironically much of this was made possible by the achievements of the classical tradition, things like the development of mind, of ideas, of visions, of technology itself - in a phrase, those things that inspire daring and fuel revolution. People became more practical and less other-worldly. What caught their fancy was what they could in principle experience. They wanted to do more, to get around more, to conquer more; and this led them to develop, or at least to encourage the development of, a new philosophy and a new way of dealing with the truth. Roughly speaking, the new philosophy was empiricism and the new way of dealing with the truth was science.

It was not so much that a world beyond experience was proven not to exist. It was simply given less priority. Other things were deemed by the culture to be more important. This had a dramatic effect on the idea of rationality. If truth was immutable and, therefore, outside of nature, then reason as the road to the truth would be necessarily independent of experience. Because experience is tied to nature through sense perception it could not possibly be used to get at the truth in this classical sense. But if we are no longer concerned primarily with this kind of truth, but rather with practical truth, with truth about this world, about its practical operations, with truth that helps us get around in nature, however variable that might be, then we find ourselves committed to experience as the basis of our thinking. For not only is experience an avenue to practical truth, it is the only avenue. As the best way of knowing or getting at the truth, reason becomes a function of our experience.

The problem is that experience is a function of practical interests and needs, and if reason is a function of experience, it is tied irrevocably to irrational and limiting forces. Our reason would truly be **our** reason, created by us, or by our culture, for **our** sake, for **our** purposes, to promote **our** welfare. It would hardly be a way of transcending the particulars of one's life.

Gone would be the objective and universal perspective on the truth, the power of reason to liberate us from the accidental features of our existence. Reason, like knowledge and, ultimately, truth itself, would seem to be rather subject-dependent, not merely dependent or relative, but dependent on us, which is to say "subjective". Reason would seem to be no more than a clever way of getting what we want. As was recognized so clearly in the classical tradition, objectivity seems to imply universality, and if this is so, we give up the latter at the cost of the former. This applies to our concept of reason as well as our concept of knowledge. And it applies to each of these as forcefully as it applies to our concepts of truth, goodness and beauty.

In politics the consequence has been to regard reason as an instrument of the status quo, as inherently conservative. Thus, if one is serious about change, that is, revolutionary or structural change, one should not pretend to reason. The imperative is to transform as expeditiously as possible the material conditions and power relationships of group life, and then, and only then, to let reason evolve as a protecting agent for the new culture. The message is clear. Far from being liberating, reason always exists with an organism. We can think of the organism as biological or cultural, individual or social, but it is constituted as a teleological system that struggles to survive and extend itself. Towards this end it develops reason. Outside of the system there is only unreason.

Reason in education - adjusting to experience

In education no less than in politics we reach a point where reason has no place. We operate instead on irrational self-interests, that is, on the perceived interests of the organism. These are irrational because they are neither universal nor objective. They are idiosyncratic. In the end they are defined by us. To teach or critique them we cannot use reason, not if reason exists merely in their service. Reason could not transcend them. It could not get beyond them as accidental controls on our lives. Education would have to assume them, not just in the relatively benign sense of taking them on, but in the deeper sense of accepting them independently of reason. The teacher could not use reason to teach them, and the student could not use reason to learn them. They could be neither understood nor evaluated by reason. They would have to be adopted and employed irrationally, without rational justification, which is to say through "imposition". They would have to be imposed in the most imposing sort of way, through indoctrination or conditioning, or just plain physical force.

If we think of education as transmitting a way of life, and a humanistic and democratic education as transmitting a humanistic and democratic way of life, then a humanistic and

democratic education - let us just call it "education" - would have two basic functions. The first would be an adjustment or socialization function that would inculcate group values and promote the general welfare. The second would be a liberating function that would focus on the dignity and betterment of the individual, that would free the individual from external constraints and internal compulsions and end with a responsible moral agent, a person who acted as a moral force in the world.

There is, of course, considerable tension between these two basic functions. It often seems that doing one negates doing the other, and this has led some to conclude that they are incompatible, that ultimately one or the other must be given up, or at least given less priority. In professed theory it is usually the liberation function that is considered most important, while in practice the adjustment function almost always dominates. While not trying to minimize this tension, the hope of most of us is that there is no need to choose or develop priorities between them, that, at least when we speak of a way of life that is humanistic and democratic, socialization promotes freedom and liberation is socially advantageous. If we might for now assume this, it must still be recorded that the liberation function is the source of the claim that education uses reason to promote reason. But what if reason is not liberating? What if it lacks the power to be liberating? Where does this leave education in a society that considers itself humanistic and democratic?

These questions bring focus on the most pressing philosophical problem in modern education. If we cannot escape linking reason with experience, how can we think of reason as liberating, as enabling us to transcend and objectively evaluate the contingent, irrational, and controlling forces to which all of us are subjected? There is one line of argument that seems especially promising. It requires us to rethink the distinction between appearance and reality. Traditionally this has been expressed as a distinction between things as they exist in our experience and things as they exist in themselves - in Kantian terms, "phenomena" and "noumena". But to the modern mind this distinction makes no sense. It has no rational basis and is, therefore, utterly unintelligible; for all we know we know through experience. For all we know, and ever will know, there are no noumena. The traditional distinction is unintelligible because the idea of a thing in itself is unintelligible. It makes sense as an ontological or substantive conception only outside of experience. But it is precisely experience that the modern mind cannot transcend, not when it is working for ontological or substantive understanding.

In these times if the distinction between appearance and reality is to be more than purely formal, it must be made within experience. Appearance becomes things within experience as they exist initially, our first impressions, so to speak. Reality becomes things within experience as they exist after we live with them for a while, after we handle them, think about

them, use them, love them - that sort of thing. John Dewey had at least two names for this, "intelligence" and "inquiry". Both were virtually synonymous with "reason". But this must be read "reason within experience", not "reason as opposed to experience". It involves searching for practical truth in the most rigorous and disciplined yet decent manner possible. For Dewey, reason is still the best way of knowing or getting at the truth. But it gets its power not from transcending experience per se, but from transcending myopic or short-sighted experience.

Critical reason a liberating force

Another more recent expression of this view is found in the work of Jurgen Habermas. He too thinks we are unfree, and he places great faith in the liberating potential of education. Interestingly enough, he regards most of the debilitating restrictions we live under as self-imposed, as placed on us not mainly by external coercive forces, but unconsciously by ourselves. As he puts it in one of his books, *Theory and Practice*, it is only because the prevailing "relationships of power" in society "have not been seen through" that they manage to control us the way they do.

These relationships have produced a network of highly repressive institutions and practices that we erroneously accept as necessary. We are led thereby to uphold and participate in a gratuitously restrictive set of social arrangements under the mistaken impression that they are indispensable to our well-being. This not only results in frustration and anxiety, deprived as we are of many of the essential requirements of life, it also means we have imposed these conditions upon ourselves, since we owe them almost entirely to our own false consciousness.

To describe a form of consciousness as false implies first of all that the function of preserving coercive social arrangements has the inevitable effect of distorting our beliefs in such a way as to present our social world falsely; that is, as beliefs they are unwarranted. Second, it implies that the falsity of our present consciousness arises out of the manner by which we have acquired it; that is, it was acquired irrationally. When one social class dominates others to the point where it can project its way of seeing things throughout society, members of this dominating class can crush rival perceptions and make it appear that their own beliefs in fact serve to promote the general welfare. When this happens the result is what Habermas calls "an ideological form of justification" and, hence, an instance of false consciousness.

The only way out of this, Habermas claims, is through reason, and in particular through "critical reason". In its perfect, most powerful form critical reason is a function of the "ideal speech situation". This is that unique set of

circumstances in which it is alone rational to acquire our "legitimizing beliefs", the norms and attitudes that go into making up our "world picture" or "social consciousness". These circumstances must be those of ideologically undistorted - and, thus, "ideal" - speech. This means that our most basic opinions can be rationally formed only under conditions of absolutely free and unlimited debate. And in this process all parties to the institutions and practices being set up must be capable of recognizing what they are freely consenting to. The only constraints must be those derived from what Habermas calls "the peculiar force of the better argument," or reason itself. If potentially repressive institutions and practices are to be rightly regarded as legitimate, it must be possible to imagine their creation under conditions of freedom and equality, and also to imagine their acceptance by the unforced consent of all those subsequently liable to be affected by their behaviour. This is founded on something like C.S. Peirce's conception of truth as "the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate" thoughtfully and empirically, and his conception of reality as "the object represented in this opinion." More than once Habermas has acknowledged this link to Peirce. We obtain objective access to the truth in the ideal speech situation. And its validity for everyone is guaranteed by the fact that it is itself free from local assumptions or cultural particularity.

But as Habermas began by insisting, this is not how our current legitimizing beliefs were in fact formed. Although our present consciousness prevents us from seeing it, they were formed under conditions of outright coercion and constraint. If only we could somehow be brought to a true consciousness of the situation in which our beliefs were actually formed, we would perceive at once that they are reflectively unacceptable; that is, we would recognize that the only reason they exercise any control over us is that we falsely believe them to have been acquired in an appropriate, rational way.

How can we ever hope, deluded as we are, to reach an unblinking recognition that our current legitimizing beliefs are indeed reflectively unacceptable? The role of critical reason - like that of the liberating function of education - is precisely that of emancipating us from our present state of bondage by enlightening us about the origin and nature of our false consciousness. In educational terms, the process takes place in three stages. The initial stage is to make us aware of the unconscious determinates of our present consciousness. We come to see that our current legitimizing beliefs have not in fact been rationally acquired, and thus that our present desires and corresponding patterns of social behaviour are out of line with our real or human interests. Next, this recognition brings us to a new cognitive state. In place of our earlier false consciousness, we rise to a true understanding of our social situation. In place of our earlier delusions we obtain an objective knowledge of the social world. Finally, this knowledge

sets us free. We come to realize that there is no good reason for us to accept our current beliefs and the social arrangements they uphold. This by itself releases us from the irrational constraints of our existing culture, liberating us from alienating pressures and allowing us to enjoy a more authentic life.

The assumption that recognizing the origins of irrational beliefs will free us from their grip should be seen as having a Freudian character. The effort to overcome repression is basically a struggle I wage with myself, a struggle to uncover and reshape my initial motivation. The only difference between Freud and Habermas on this score, and admittedly this is important, is that Habermas does not trace the root causes of repression to our physiology, but rather to institutions and practices we mistakenly regard as legitimate and, hence, impose upon ourselves. Still, reason remains the cure. The emphasis is on the "redeeming power of reflection". This was Dewey's faith too. We do not need to transcend practical interests and needs, only judge correctly whether they are real or rational.

Reason in the 20th century

So, what does the commitment to reason amount to in the twentieth century? If we cannot defend reason as it was conceived in the classical tradition, and should not defend it as subjective, what are the alternatives? There would seem to be only one. Reason represents a commitment to talk, to think, wonder and debate under conditions that exclude the will to power. It is opposed to fighting, to arrogance and self-righteousness, and to the desire to deceive and dominate. One should never think that reason could be reduced to technique, or to formal, depersonalized logic, for these can function merely to impose our subjective and, therefore, irrational preferences. Reason is a conversation within ourselves, between people, or with nature itself, and it constitutes nothing short of a mode of living, which is to say, a distinct culture or way of life.

To reason is to negotiate seriously and fairly with as many concerned parties as possible. The power of reason in the classical sense is also its power in this sense. It is the essence of man and distinguishes human beings from beasts. It has intrinsic as well as extrinsic value because it is liberating. It may never be all there is to a person, and perhaps that is a good thing. But it remains an ideal worth working for - not only our obligation, but our inspiration and hope for a better future.

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