

Philosophical Foundation of General Education

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General education is a special component of education in general. As such its philosophical foundation is also a component of the general philosophy of education. What is the general philosophy of education?. We can only offer a brief summary of ideas encapsulating what had been thought about since the time of the ancient Greeks to the present.

Basically the aims of education are the following: (a) to acquire the necessary knowledge for living within the social and cultural system; (b) to acquire understanding of human and non-human life forms as well as other phenomena in the universe; (c) to ensure the spiritual, moral, psychological and intellectual development of the personality in the condition of physical well being; (d) to develop the proper sense of civic consciousness and social solidarity and (e) to attain the good life.

Whatever was the cultural and religious system of any community throughout history, whatever was perceived as education, revolved around these aims. The concrete historical manifestations differed widely but the underlying assumptions were the same.

Due to the proliferation of knowledge and forms of life that had taken place to date, it becomes impossible to grasp the totality of education in a single conceptual framework. This problem has been well expressed sixty five years ago by a reflective educationist. She said “There can be no one educational aim, however general and inclusive it may be. The variety of educational activities is productive of a multitude of aims and one is justified in referring to an educational aim only to extent that one views it as a general direction, or as a unifying outlook and a methodological basis of criticism. Educational aims may range from the most specific, such as the fostering of a certain habit or skill demanded by our society of today, to the most general, such as efficient citizenship. self realization of personality, effective sharing in life, depending on which particular process or particular body of processes of the total educational activity is singled out. The theoretical problem in facing a multitude of aims, is not that of subordinating all specific aims to one single all-unifying one, or of denying specific aims their right of functioning, but of weighing one aim against another, and of seeing every single one in the light of all the rest.”¹

The same goes with general studies. *The Report of the Harvard Committee on General Education in a Free Society*, emphasized that specialism, though necessary could not be the basis of a well ordered society. As an example of the aim of general education, it cited the need to provide the broad critical sense by which to recognize competence in any field. We trust the advice of our doctor, our plumber, our lawyer and so on, but we need the sagacity to distinguish the expert from the quack, the better from the worst.² This kind of knowledge is not specially developed by the specialized disciplines. We cite this instance purely as an example of the infinite possibilities of topics for general education.

Let us proceed by identifying what general education is. Briefly general education concerns the area of useful and significant knowledge not dealt by the specialized

disciplines but to some extent nourished by them. It employs the same rational and scientific method applied by the disciplines. As noted in the Harvard Report, it is not the matter of taking one course after another, as something outside the field of concentration, something formless. It is an organic whole whose parts join in expounding a ruling idea and in serving a common aim, just as it is in the combination of disciplines for special training.³

In brief, general education deals with issues not dealt by the special disciplines but nevertheless significant for the development of man. In the history of ideas there is a cumulative growth of insight and understanding around a certain theme. At a certain point a leap in the depth of understanding and awareness occurs thanks to the effort of a creative mind. I would call this the summative point because it summarizes, enlarges and deepens previous knowledge on the subject. Such a summative attainment in the field of general education is found in the thought of Cardinal John Henry Newman, one of the greatest educationists of this century, in his nine Dublin discourses on university teaching. These discourses were published in 1852 and the ninth final edition was in 1889, one year before his death in 1890.

Amongst others Cardinal Newman stressed the need for intellectual development as a value in itself. It is not to earn a living like the professions but nevertheless it is very important, this cultivation of the mind. This cultivation requires not only knowledge but a formative principle which is the intellect. Through this intellectual process the mind experiences an enlargement. This event is not merely the passive reception of new ideas by the mind but is also an energetic and simultaneous action upon them. "It is the action of a formative power reducing to order and meaning the matter of our acquirement, it is making the objects of our knowledge subjectively our own, or, to use a familiar word, it is a digestion of what we receive, into the substance of our previous state of thought; and without this no enlargement is said to follow."⁴

Cardinal Newman then distinguishes between mere knowledge and the intellect. Its development is an end in itself. The intellect has its own special power of illumination. "It is not the mere edition to our knowledge that is the crimation: but the locomotion, the movement onwards, of that mental centre, to which both what we know, and what we are learning, the accumulating mass of our acquirements, gravitates."⁵

Truly great intellects such as Aristotle, St. Thomas, Newton or Goethe took a connected view of old and new, past and present, far and near, and possessed into the influence of all these, one on another without which there is no totality or central core. Intellectual knowledge is not only of things but also of their true mutual relations. It is not knowledge that is merely acquired but knowledge of philosophy.⁶

The cultivation of the intellect is the distinct end by itself just as virtue and health are ends in themselves. What would happen if this quality is missing in the education of man?. Cardinal Newman described the scenery which had expanded to a greater clarity in our times. He said, "I will tell you Gentlemen, what has been the practical error of the last twenty-years, not to load the memory of the students with a mass of undigested knowledge, but to force upon him so much that he has rejected all. It has been the error of distracting and enfeebling the mind by an unmeaning profusion of subjects; of implying that a smattering in a dozen branches is not shallowness which it really is, but enlargement, which it is not; of considering an acquaintance with the learned names of things and persons, and the possession of clever duodecimos, and attendance on eloquent lectures, and membership with scientific institutions,

and the sight of experiments of a platform and the specimens of a museum, that all this was not dissipation of mind, but progress.”⁷

All are to be learned at once, not one after another and not one well but many badly. “Learning,” he said, “Is to be without exertion, without attention, without toil, without grounding, without advance, without finishing. There is to be nothing individual in it; and this, forsooth, is the wonder of the age.”⁸ During the century that passed after Newman expressed his warning, much has been noticed on the fragmentation of knowledge and sciences, of morality, of psychology, of human relation, of the general view of life as a whole.

The core meaning and function of general education is to recover the totality approach and to develop the intellect. The intellect has a special quality and is good in itself. This good, as Newman explained is not the direct source of the disciplines. Although the disciplines aim to attain it, it does not originate the disciplines. It is a quality enhancing and modifying the discipline. The discipline strives for the good for which it is meant, and this good is an end in itself. A healthy body is good in itself, and medical science is the discipline. Newman asked why not also a healthy intellect? If a healthy intellect is good in itself then there must be the organization of knowledge necessary to cultivate the intellect. A special process of development is required.

The development of the intellect directed to significant issues is what has been conceived as liberal education or general studies. It has not a utilitarian or pragmatic aim as professional or vocational education but yet it is extremely vital because the object of the profession is not the overall ultimate object of living and hence it cannot encompass the total sphere of life. General education aims at drawing from that totality in the most profound manner.

The two fundamental aspects of general education, the cultivation of the intellect and the kind of knowledge pursued, are subject of further analysis and growth. What is meant by cultivation of the intellect and what kind of subject matter have to be defined in spatial and temporal context, given the foundation philosophy of education which is currently moving more and more towards the concept of civil society based on human rights. Karl Mannheim proposed six guidelines in the reformation of democratic and liberal education. The first three are of relevance here. (1) Education does not mould man in the abstract but in the concretely given society; (2) the ultimate educational unit is not the individual but the group though the individuals in the group would be appealed to conform; and (3) the educational aims of society cannot be separated from “the situations that each age is called upon to face and from the social order for which they are framed.”⁹

Our Malaysian social order, and for that matter, any other, would have to take its own selection of significant topics and decide what kind of cultivation of the intellect it desires. From Newman's discourses it is clear that what he meant by intellect is a quality of thinking derived from a kind of mental ability leading to greater awareness and deeper understanding. This ability is there all the time to be developed. Those in the disciplines apply it in their respective spheres with a special focus. However this faculty of the mind has to be applied and developed throughout all spheres of life not necessarily in the style of the disciplines. Its purpose is the enlargement of the mind.

Newman gave the following illustration: “For instance, let a person, whose experience has hitherto been confined to the unpretending scenery of these islands, whether here or in

England, go for the first time into parts, where physical nature puts on her wilder and more awful forms, whether at home or abroad, as into mountainous districts, or let one, who has ever lived in a quiet village, go for the first time to a great metropolis, then I suppose he will have a sensation, which perhaps he never had before. He has a feeling not in addition or increase of former feelings, but of something different in kind. He will perhaps be borne forward, and find for a time that he has lost his bearings. He has made a certain progress, and he has a new centre, and a range of thought, to which he was before a stranger.”¹⁰

This enlargement of the mind is experienced by the astronomer looking at the heavens, the naturalist observing animal behaviour, the historian appraising past events, the physicist observing the universe, in-fact everywhere by all in innumerable situations including anyone who enters into active life in society. On the other hand, here were those who show no sign of enlargement even after accumulating a vast body of knowledge. “They abound in information in detail, curious and entertaining, about men and things; and having lived under the influence of not very clear or settled principles, religious or political, they speak of everyone and everything, only as so many phenomena, which are complete in themselves, and lead to nothing, not discussing them or teaching any truth, or instructing the hearer, but simply talking. No one would say, that these persons, well informed, as they are, had attained to any great culture of intellect or to philosophy.”¹¹

The enlargement of the mind as the object of studies, as alluded to earlier, would be guided by the circumstance and aspirations of our time, The great advocate for education, the third President of United States of America, Thomas Jefferson (1763-1826), founder of the Democratic Party consistently championed the life of the mind and its relation to the good of society, Jefferson was a vigorous thinker who fit very well Cardinal Newman's description of the enlarged mind, the cultivated intellect. Jefferson emphasized the need for the historical approach at the beginning stages of education. The purpose was to prevent the corruption and degeneration of American society. “History”, he observed, “by appraising them of the past, will enable them to judge of the future; it will avail them of the experience of other times and other nations; it will qualify them as judges of the actions and designs of men: it will enable them to know ambition under every disguise it may assume: and knowing it, to defeat its views. In every government on earth is some trace of human weakness, some germ of corruption and degeneracy, which cunning will discover, and wickedness insensibly open, cultivate and improve. Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves therefore are its only safe depositories. And to render even them safe, their minds must be improved to a certain degree.”¹²

What Jefferson had in mind was not the pragmatic and utilitarian type of education though this too he insisted upon. He was a pioneer in general studies and one of the themes of great interest to him was the healthy moral development of his society, the defence of freedom and liberty, the democratic life and so forth.

Within the Malaysian context our course on the state and constitution as part of general studies should be woven with the history and philosophy of civil society that emerged in 18th century Europe. There are innumerable subjects that can be formulated as general studies based on our present stage of development and our collective Malaysian philosophical foundation. These courses through relying on knowledge from the West and sharing a common body of knowledge are yet distinctively different from what could be a similar course in the West.

Let us imagine that we have a course in our National University of Malaysia here on ideas of great thinkers. To begin with our selection of thinkers would be guided by a demand of our times and our Malaysian perspectives. If we were to offer lectures for the course, many would be devoted to non-Western thinkers. This may include such figures as Ibn Khaldun, Al-Biruni, Wang An Shih, Jose Rizal, Sakuma Shozan, Hu Shih, Ram Mohun Roy, Dayananda Saraswati, Iqbal, Afghani, Ahmad Khan, Tagore and a host of others, from parts of the non-Western World as well. This would also include 19th century Russian thinkers whose works are extremely relevant to our present situation. 13

We are now living in an era of rapid social change together with a similar scientific and technological change. Change on our worldview as well as its various aspects can be a significant course in general studies. The fight against social injustice, the establishment of a society based on the fundamental rights of man, is a very strong force that is spreading throughout the world including Malaysia. A course on such a theme is not directed to prepare the student for a professional career but to develop his intellectual awareness and his attainment as a civilized human being.

Let me go back to the primary aim of general studies, the cultivation of the intellect tied up to certain themes not dealt by the existing disciplines. It is true that no study can be all exhaustive without any limit. Granted the fact that general studies is only a part of general university education, nevertheless it is a significant part. It supplements the educational transformation effected by the disciplines in the most crucial manner. It aims to prevent what social scientists call the disproportionate development of the human faculty.

Newman had pointed this out through an illustration. Young boys talk at random and often they do things without understanding the consequences. Their minds have no intellectual foundation to build upon. They are dazzled by phenomena instead of perceiving things as they are. "It were well," Newman continued, "if none remained boys all their lives; but what is more common than the sight of grown men, talking on political or moral or religious subjects, in that off hand, idle way, which we signify by the word unreal? That they simply do not know what they are talking about is that spontaneous silent remark of any man of sense who hears them. Hence such persons have no difficulty in contradicting themselves in successive sentences, without being conscious of it."¹⁴

This is a fairly universal phenomenon, the intellectually low level of awareness amongst educated people including specialists when they talk outside their field of study or specialization. In times of crisis, the inability to appraise events and current dominating ideas can be a very serious problem. The late George Orwell, the well-known British novelist and essayist refuted the suggestion that the world would be better off if it was dominated by scientists, in the popular sense of the word. Scientific education, according to Orwell, does not mean attention to the exact sciences only. It is the implanting of a rational, sceptical and experimental habit of mind that can be called upon to solve any problem one meets. It is not simply piling up a lot of facts.¹⁵

Training in the exact sciences does not guarantee a human outlook. Science is said to be international but the scientific communities in different countries had uncritically succumbed to unscrupulous nationalism. The German scientific community offered no resistance to Hitler. The British scientists accepted the structure of capitalist society. Those who did not, often Communist, were equally uncritical of what they supported. Thus scientific education should be taken in the broad sense, in the sense of developing a profound and healthy

rational outlook capable of tackling all problems of life. Orwell summarized it as follows: “All it means is that scientific education for the masses will do little good, and probably a lot of harm, if it simply boils down to more physics, more chemistry, more biology, etc. to the detriment of literature and history. Its probable effect on the average human being would be to narrow the range of his thoughts and make him more than ever contemptuous of such knowledge as he did not possess: and his political reactions would probably be somewhat less intelligent than those of an illiterate peasant who retained a few historical memories and a fairly sound aesthetic sense.”¹⁶

In conclusion, general studies aims at the education of man from the point of view of his intellectual development that leads to a comprehensive growth of his mind and personality. It is not a mere distribution of disparate knowledge taken from here and there simply to meet the requirement of a degree. It is selecting attention on definite themes in an analytic and intellectual fashion, not covered by professional disciplines, the goals of which are not to develop a career but to develop the total personality. It is not the intention to teach a little of everything but to teach enough of certain things. We avoid the type described by Horace Mann, the American educationist, who said: “Those persons who know a little of everything but nothing well, have been aptly compared to a certain sort of pocket-knife, which some over-curious people carry about with them which, in addition to a common knife, contains a file, a chisel, a saw, a gimlet, a screw-driver and a pair of scissors but all so diminutive, that the moment they are needed for use, they are found useless.”¹⁷

NOTES

1. Hilda Taba. The Dynamics of Education in John S. Brubacher, (Ed.) *Electric Philosophy of Education*. Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliff, N. J. 1962. P. 207.
2. W. F. Connell, R. L. Debus, W. R. Nibblet, (Eds.), *Readings in the Foundations of Education*. Ian Novak, Sydney. 1966. p. 164.
3. *Ibid*, p. 166.
4. John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, p. 120. Oxford University Press, London, 1976.
5. *Ibid*, p. 121
6. *Ibid*, p. 121.
7. *Ibid*, p 127.
8. *Ibid*, p. 127.
9. Karl Mannheim, *Diagnosis of Our Time*, p. 7, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, London, 1943.
10. John Henry Newman, *Op. Cit*, p. 209.
11. *Ibid*, p. 2: 5.
12. Gordon C. Lee, (ed.) *Crusade against ignorance: Thomas Jefferson on Education*, pp. 96-97. Teachers College Press, New York, 1912.
13. See, Syed Hussein Alatas. *Intellectuals in Developing Societies*. Frank Cass, London, 1977.
14. John Henry Newman, *Op. Cit*, p. 11.
15. George Orwell, "What is Science", in William A. Heffernan, (ed.). *The Harvest Reader*, p. 221. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York 1984.
16. George Orwell, *Op. Cit*, p. 221.
17. Horace Mann, *Lectures on Education*. p. 41 Arno Press and The New York; Times, New York. 1969.