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Untimely Education Today

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Abstract

At the present moment, there is a danger facing the proponents of liberal arts education. In trying to salvage the liberal arts tradition, its apologists risk diluting it to the point of unrecognizability. Invoking the Nietzschean category of untimeliness and drawing out the importance of reading the writings of the dead, this essay examines the contemporary cultural landscape and offers a critical assessment of the ongoing mechanization of human beings. It suggests that for liberal arts education to mean something substantive today, it must assume, in opposition to this dehumanizing process, a less acquiescent stance towards the environment in which it is imbedded.

Keywords: education, liberal arts, untimeliness, reading, mechanization, Nietzsche

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An enthusiasm for innovative practices in contemporary pedagogy has led to a state in which novelty itself has become an object of fetishization. The desire to be up to date and the concomitant fear of being outmoded often serve to reinforce, unreflectively, dominant tendencies associated with the cutting edge. Against a conformism in the face of such tendencies, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, Nietzsche's third *Untimely Meditation*, published in 1874, provides a subversive alternative stance on pedagogical practice and the ends at which education should aim. For a contemporary meditation drawing inspiration from this work, the concept of untimeliness constitutes an instructive category for thinking through the task of education today. More specifically, Nietzsche's insistence that the education we need must be untimely supplies us with a fruitful point of entry for asking ourselves what a liberal arts education can possibly mean and what it might still have to offer in the twenty-first century.

Writing in the 1870s, at a time of perceived cultural crisis, Nietzsche lamented the poor state of contemporary education and the sorry condition of German culture. He looked around at the world he found himself in and found it to be lacking. Perhaps such discontent is something of a transhistorical constant; no matter what place or time we transport ourselves to, we can always find some people in it who are not happy with it. Some of Nietzsche's objections to the age in which he lived are no longer relevant to us—after all, a century and a half has elapsed since he wrote; other protestations of his seem more pertinent now than then—perhaps because the tendencies he identified, in their nascent form, have been amplified with the acceleration of modernity. The significance of Nietzsche's pedagogical intervention lies less, however, in his specific claims about the state of modernity than in his revaluation and creative deployment of the concept of untimeliness. For Nietzsche, untimeliness means being in opposition to the dominant tendencies of one's age; it suggests a kind of dislocation, an incongruity between self and world. It is closely tied to a refusal of mass conformity and to an assertion of that which is distinctive to the individual.[1] One of the virtues of a liberal arts education resides in its potential to help us to place ourselves at a remove from prevailing currents; it may encourage, both among

[1] The project of realizing individuality announces itself at the outset of *Schopenhauer as Educator*, where Nietzsche reminds us of the singularity and uniqueness of our existence before he goes on to address what he judges to be the deficiencies of contemporary education.

teachers and students, a questioning of the reigning system of values and a consideration of unfashionable existential ideals.

At the present moment, there is a danger facing the proponents of liberal arts education. In trying to salvage the liberal arts tradition, its apologists risk diluting it to the point of unrecognizability. This dilution occurs, in large measure, as a result of the perceived need of liberal-arts boosters to accommodate themselves to existing institutions, policies, market forces, and cultural trends. In order to survive, so the argument goes, the model must be modified to align with the pressing demands and requirements of the social, economic, political, and cultural order. But if such demands and requirements are what we as educators, both teachers and administrators, aim to satisfy, then we risk merely perpetuating this order. In opposition to this accommodationism, a post-Nietzschean perspective suggests that for liberal arts education to mean something substantive, it must assume a less acquiescent stance towards the environment in which it is imbedded.

First, though, it is important to clarify what is central to liberal arts education. What lies at its heart? Given the diversity of forms that it has assumed historically and given the different ideals with which it has been traditionally associated, it would be misguided to imagine that it possesses some underlying essence distinguishing it from all other educational models. Nonetheless, I want to highlight an especially salient aspect of this tradition, one that links it more closely with the humanities and humanistic studies—namely, the focus on reading the writings of the dead. Such a foregrounding may serve as an untimely corrective to a worrisome current trend towards a shallow presentism, which hinders the development of historical consciousness and confines us to shrinking intellectual horizons.[2] Reading the writings of the dead is not, quite obviously, a panacea that will remedy the woes of world, but these writings do provide us with potential resources for individual and communal transformation. Precisely on account of their seeming lack of immediate relevance to the requirements of the moment, they

[2] It might seem unwittingly ironic, in making the case for the need for greater historical consciousness, to invoke Nietzsche of all people, who so harshly condemned the excesses of history in *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, his second *Untimely Meditation*, and who stressed the existential priority of the unhistorical vis-à-vis the historical. What Nietzsche disparaged, however, was not historical study as such, but its divorce from our vital interests.

facilitate a rethinking of it; a temporal distancing of this sort enables one to see what remains otherwise concealed.

We are inclined to unduly inflate the worth of those things that are dearest to us—and bibliophiles are not excepted from this inclination. And we are too quick to believe that what has happened to prove beneficial to us, or what we imagine to have been so proven, is beneficial in-itself and thus ought to be taken up by others. One can prize close textual engagement with old books even in recognizing that an education organized around such engagement may not be conducive to the flourishing of many students, whose aptitudes and inclinations lie elsewhere. But it is also the case that aptitudes and inclinations are not simple givens; they arise in response to the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Reading the dead is an activity that deepens our acquaintance with tradition—or, to be more precise, with variant, sometimes oppositional, traditions; through it, we carry works of the past forward with us into the future. It is an exercise in conservation. But while reading the dead is a conserving exercise, it is not inherently conservative in any substantive political sense. It is neither inherently conservative nor inherently revolutionary although it can be put to both conservative and revolutionary ends. Rather, it is a highly equivocal activity since we can appropriate works of the past for radically divergent purposes.

Given our contemporary historical situation, the mere act of engaging with works of the distant past already partakes, howsoever modestly, of something untimely insofar as it opens up a space of separation from current trends. But what constitutes and distinguishes an untimely mode of engagement? Achieving clarity about the category of the untimely requires a recognition of that to which it stands opposed, namely the dominant tendencies of the era in which we live. What is ascendant at this moment? What is in decline? An assessment of present trajectories cannot wholly forego futurological speculation, which is always dubious. In addition, substantive differences persist between locations—although, one might still maintain that, with intensifying globalization, the significance of such differences has somewhat diminished. In any case, to determine what is properly untimely demands a prior determination of what is presently hegemonic, with all the difficulties that such an endeavor entails.

The second problem, one even more fraught with difficulty, involves the formulation of an evaluative judgement. Nietzsche's portrayal of untimeliness is not simply descriptive; it contains a critical assessment of features of modern culture

that he deems to be deleterious. Among those features identified as pervasive, which of these should we see as welcome and salubrious; which of these are unwelcome and harmful? And what ultimately grounds such assessments and constitutes good grounds for them? There exist competing claims about the state of the present, about what in it warrants preserving and what merits abolition. Such disagreements, resistant to resolution, are an inextinguishable feature of human plurality.

With these caveats in mind, I want to propose one model of the timely, in the Nietzschean sense, as it applies to our contemporary situation. But even if this particular characterization does not strike the reader as persuasive, the procedure being undertaken may still remain an instructive one. This procedure consists in identifying prevalent and pernicious tendencies of our time before seeking to ascertain the methods and the tasks of liberal arts education; according to the proposal on offer here, these methods and tasks should be oriented towards working against such tendencies. There are, to be sure, many problematic aspects of the contemporary world that are worth working against just as there is much worth salvaging, lauding, and encouraging. One of the problematic aspects that a liberal arts education is well positioned to counter is what might be described as the ongoing mechanization of human beings. At the present moment, there are anxieties that, with continuing advances towards artificial intelligence, machines are coming to approximate human beings in their exhibition of human-like faculties. This worry is not unfounded, but as educators who wish to keep alive the spirit of the liberal arts, there is another trajectory that should be still more troubling to us. The danger, from an educational standpoint, is not that machines are becoming more and more like human beings; it is that human beings are descending to the level of machines. Putting the matter in such crudely oppositional terms might seem to be a mere repetition of a tired cliché of Romanticism, with its invidious distinctions between the organic and the mechanistic. After all, for more than two centuries, the Romantics and their ideological successors have been bewailing our alienation from nature and bemoaning the rise of the artificial at the expense of the natural. But to foreground the dangers of mechanization does not in itself condemn us to a rehashing of anti-modernist laments.

Even so, given its resonances with outmoded conservative jeremiads, the category of mechanization might not seem to be worth resuscitating in the service of contemporary cultural criticism. As a metaphor applied to human actors, it fails to

make sense of the dynamics of the human psyche, to account for one of the principal points of difference between humans and machines, namely the presence in the former of appetition, which is not in any danger of vanishing; to this extent, the language of mechanization is out of place. Nonetheless, insofar as the category allows us to detect instances in which distinctive features of our humanity are suffering occlusion, it retains its provisional utility. If pressed too far, it loses both precision and plausibility; but it may also facilitate a recognition of dehumanizing processes that, at our peril, are too often neglected or minimized.

The term "mechanization of human beings" thus stands in need of clarification and requires further analytic distinctions. I want to highlight, then, the forms that this process assumes and to elucidate three dimensions of it—thoughtlessness, solipsism, and reactiveness. There might not be anything unique to the twenty-first century in its suffering from these defects; they are, in a certain sense, transhistorical features of human existence that can be found across space and time, and no human being is entirely free from them. Nonetheless, as a result of a confluence of factors, the present moment offers an especially propitious breeding ground for them. We must first recognize these tendencies in ourselves and in society at large, and recognize them as dangerous, before we are in a position to ask how we might, as educators, move to counter them.

The designation of thoughtlessness indicates the presence of a lack; its antipode, thoughtfulness, suggests a fulness that reaches beyond itself. To be thoughtful means not to take the given as given but to give thought to the given. This activity of giving thought comprises a rethinking of posited objectives—although it does not exhaust itself therein. Thoughtfulness, in this more restricted sense, involves regarding the ends that we pursue, posing the question to ourselves of the value of what we pursue, and sometimes casting doubt on these ends and values. Thoughtlessness and the mechanistic go hand in hand insofar as computing devices, at least at the current stage of their technological development, are not able to question the purposes for which they are constructed and programmed. Their powers of calculation, data retention, and data retrieval far exceed that of any human being; but while these powers are crucial components of human intelligence and human thinking, they are not sufficient to call forth the virtue of thoughtfulness, which demands a mode of comportment to our own self-posited ends that includes the possibility of subversion.

Why should we be inclined to view

thoughtlessness as a dominant tendency of our times? One might counter that human beings give thought, almost inescapably, to the goals that they pursue; in seeking to obtain satisfaction of our desires, and in moments of indecision about what desires to satisfy, do we not pose the problem of what we should aim at and, in this very process of posing, engage in the activity of giving thought? Perhaps. But it is also the case that many of the ends we pursue are not subjected to questioning, even in moments of indecision; they are, all too often, simply taken as given. If we look, for example, at the market of self-help books, they are oriented towards helping us get what we want, at finding success in career, in finance, in romance; they are, ultimately, instrumental in nature. The question of whether success in these domains is desirable or not fails to be raised because the answer to it is already assumed. There might be forms of self-help literature that purport to be more "spiritual" in orientation; but if we scratch the surface, much of this literature also proves, more often than not, to be instrumentalist, showing us, although in less crudely materialistic fashion, how we can best maximize our happiness. The spirit of modern culture should not be reduced to self-help literature, but this genre nonetheless reveals something about our present moment. As we rush about thoughtlessly, in an accelerating world, in pursuit of our desires, the question of the worthiness of what we pursue finds itself eclipsed.

No less integral to the mechanization of human beings is the defect of solipsism. Understood as a philosophical doctrine, solipsism refers to the belief that only one's own mind exists; in its more modest form, the doctrine casts doubt on the knowability of other minds without being so bold as to deny their existence outright. I use the word in a less technical sense to characterize not a doctrine but a disposition, a mode of comportment to other beings in the world—or, rather, to characterize the deficiency of such a comportment. To suffer from solipsism means to be locked up in oneself, to be unable to step outside of oneself or to have great difficulty in doing so. Such solipsism is a defining feature of the mechanistic; a computer program can calculate what others will do—with sufficient input of reliable data, it can sometimes do this much better than purported human experts—but it cannot enter into their thoughts, cannot empathize with them. Solipsism points, then, to an inability to put oneself in the place of another, to the lack of a capacity to see things from their affectively laden perspective. It is, in a word, a failure of the sympathetic imagination.

But one might object, here, that our

present moment is far from solipsistic. With technological advances in communications, human beings are more connected to one another than they ever have been before; they are, via the connective platforms of social media, in constant intercourse with one another. Isn't that the very opposite of being locked up in oneself? Moreover, as a result of globalization, people travel more frequently and more easily to other parts of the world, for leisure as well as for labor, than they ever did before. Doesn't all this connectivity represent a great cultural triumph over solipsism? It is true, no doubt, that the experience of the foreign can facilitate self-transcendence; but such overcoming, which involves an act of imaginative transposition, is not brought about by the mere fact of connectivity. Surveying the landscape of social media, we find that the virtual world consists largely of echo chambers. People speak to their own tribe, and when they do speak to those outside of the tribe, it is to speak at them, often aggressively and combatively, rather than to give a hearing to them. And insofar as the tribe is an extension of the self, with shared outlooks and shared values, then tribalism is itself a form of solipsism; it is merely its communal expression.

The third feature of the mechanization of human beings, reactiveness, is closely aligned with heteronomy; instead of governing ourselves, we are ruled, in such a condition, by something external to us. A machine is eminently reactive in this sense; it does what it is programmed to do. It does not posit its own goals independent of its programming. Applied to human beings, reactiveness bespeaks the mechanistic failure of self-governance as evinced in the incapacity to resist responding to an external stimulus; the stimulus might be an object of desire or an object of aversion. If it is an object of desire, something that excites the will to possess, the reactive individual cannot refrain from looking at it or seeking to appropriate it; if it is an object of aversion, the reactive individual cannot refrain from recoiling from it or confronting it aggressively. In either case, what is decisive is the involuntary character at work in the reaction, not the direction towards or away from a given stimulus.

Our current socio-economic system has made not inconsiderable headway to reducing human beings to sites of reaction. This can perhaps be seen most clearly with regard to advertising, especially as it pertains to the sale and purchase of commodities. The dominant economic system on the planet is designed to ensure that people respond to commodities mechanically, which also means predictably; advertising discourages space for reflection,

which always carries with it the danger of unpredictability, and seeks to supplant it with calculable desire. Often the point is to convince consumers that they desperately need a product that they did not even know existed the day before yesterday, and then to assure them that in choosing this product they are exercising freedom of choice, while they have actually been transmuted into reactants that can be comfortably manipulated like other computable objects. But the temper of reactiveness goes beyond the acquisition of material goods. It exhibits itself in the knee-jerk responses of ideological enemies raging against each other, who in their fury and indignation are unable to refrain from lashing out. Victims of reactiveness display a kind of passivity, but this state of diminished agency remains wholly compatible with ceaseless motion and an abundance of energy. People who are quickly rushing from place to place, who always have some task at hand, who are forever on the go, might conceive of themselves as highly active individuals, but all too often they are actually inert. Inertia, after all, does not simply mean being at rest, being unable to initiate movement; it also means, when applied to a body in motion, being unable to come to a halt without the application of an external force. The reactive character of modern life conceals itself, however, beneath a veneer of rapid movement that mistakes itself for initiative and spontaneity.

If this portrayal of mechanization, painted in such broad brushstrokes, suffers from exaggeration in danger of descending into caricature, it risks such descent in order to draw out tendencies perceived as dehumanizing. The characterization is not intended as an antimodernist indictment or a belittlement of the achievements of the moment. But the task of an untimely meditation, in a Nietzschean spirit, is precisely to draw attention to the less flattering features of ourselves and the age in which we live. Nietzsche operates in the mode of a cultural critic providing a kind of medical diagnosis; the sicknesses of the age must first be recognized, their scope and distinguishing features discerned, before one can determine the requisite procedures, the health-inducing measures that should be undertaken against them. The purpose of such untimely criticism is not merely to arraign; it serves an ultimately constructive end, and it does so through its frank assessment of current challenges.

Can a liberal arts education help us in this endeavor? Can the act of reading dead people serve as a sanative against such pervasive tendencies as thoughtlessness, solipsism, and reactiveness? It certainly cannot do so in a mechanical fashion or in a magical one; it is not some sort of fairy

wand that can whisk these things away. Yet it does provide us with a favorable opportunity to work against them. One cannot manufacture thoughtfulness, but the act of reading the dead opens up a space for its exercise. In reading widely, in traversing past centuries and encountering remote cultures, students become aware of divergent value systems, rival moralities, visions of the good life far removed from those to which they are accustomed and which they easily take for granted as being the most commonsensical and obvious; this calls forth a reconsideration of the ends at which we aim and the goals for which we strive. Such reading has the potential to de-naturalize; it encourages us not to take the values with which we are most familiar as a simple given, but to give thought to where our ideals come from and to what actually grounds them. It invites both historical inquiry and philosophical reflection.

Inquiry and reflection in this vein also serve as correctives to solipsism. In order to properly read the dead, it is necessary to enter into their spirit. This does not, obviously, require an assent to the opinions they hold; the whole point, in fact, is to be able to enter into the spirit of another even where disagreement persists. Against solipsism, a liberal arts education, as conceived here, nourishes the sympathetic imagination. In trying to make sense of that which is alien to us, in striving as best we can, albeit imperfectly, to understand the foreign on its own terms, we achieve a kind of self-transcendence through which our own horizons are widened. This is less an exercise in assimilative conquest than a movement towards an ever-enlarging circle of consciousness. Here as elsewhere, what is important is not the brute fact of reading the dead; what is demanded is to read them in an attentive and expansive way, at once contextually attuned and dialogically engaged. And it is incumbent upon us as teachers to learn and to impart this mode of reading.

Finally, a liberal arts education has the promise to mitigate reactiveness. The act of sitting quietly, reading with full attentiveness, devoting oneself to a work without occupying oneself with its instrumental value or immediate utility, is itself a procedure that undercuts reactiveness. It creates a small space of stillness in a bustling world. Just as, in an anti-solipsistic vein, such reading cultivates the virtue of involvement, it cultivates, in the spirit of anti-reactiveness, the virtue of detachment. There is liberation in learning not to dismiss an assertion because it says things at variance with one's own opinions or to rush into thoughtless agreement with it because it says things that happen to coincide with what we believe. Through the fos-

tering of the capacity to overcome reflex actions, which necessitates a temporary suspension of the instinct to dismiss or to assent, we attain a distance from our own affective responses, one that facilitates self-scrutiny. And with the interruption of unreflective impulse, occasioned by the feat of deliberate pausing, we open ourselves both to the unfamiliar, as discovered in instances of textual encounter, and to the possibility of thinking about ourselves, inclusive of our own judgements and desires, in unforeseen ways that elicit our own surprise. In all these cases, a liberal arts education, a humanistic system of teaching and learning centered on reading the writings of the dead, provides us with the resources not just to enhance our understanding of the world and to increase our knowledge of it, but to deepen our humanity by working against the entrenched forces of mechanization.

Such at least is one vision of what a liberal arts education ought to be oriented towards. For those who are less vexed at the prospect of our mechanization or who doubt its actual occurrence as delineated here, there may well be other features of our contemporary moment that seem more pertinent, more urgently in need of confrontation and correction. But whatever timely tendencies we wish to identify as the most hegemonic and the most dangerous, such an identification is necessary for us not as cultural critics, but as educators. How to bring about an education that makes space for alternative ways of being, at odds with the fads and dictates of the hour, is no easy matter. In a rapidly changing world, liberal arts education might very well need to change in order to survive; but if it is too successful in surviving, too adept at adapting to the needs of the moment, then it risks being submerged and subordinated to the dominant mode of our times. It might then continue to exist, but in so continuing, it might also lose its very reason for existing.

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