

Review of: "Intellectualism without Humanism is more Dangerous than Illiteracy"

John B. Cobb

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

I greatly appreciate what these writers have done. They have written from a humanistic point of view about what an educational system that has rejected humanism is doing to human beings. If I have a contribution to make, it is to explain how this situation came about in the United States. I think other parts of the world have acted similarly.

For many centuries, education was dominated by liberal arts. The liberal arts were designed to acculturate students. Students learned what was thought to be best in Western culture so that they could be informed by it and share it with others. Liberal arts education was fundamentally student-centered.

American universities shared this basic orientation with American liberal arts colleges. Of course, they also encouraged their faculty to do research. But they noticed that the best American research was generally dependent on German research and fitted in to the ongoing patterns there. If one succeeded in being accepted as a partner by German scholars, one was highly celebrated in the United States. Status in American university circles increasingly depended on one's ability to take part in the German discussion. It seemed far more scholarly and advanced than any other part of what was going on in the United States.

Germany had developed the "Wissenschaften", that is what we now call "academic disciplines." These were inspired by Immanuel Kant. Kant introduced a new kind of dualism into Western thought when science had shown that humans are one species of natural things among others and cannot be set over against the rest of the world as if they were not part of "nature." He distinguished instead two kinds of thinking. One is about facts; the other is about values. He wrote two critiques, one about pure reason, the other about practical reason, that is, how should we act. He separated these two radically. Pure reason does not consider whether something is desirable or not. It asks only whether it is factually true.

German universities understood that their task was to create a context maximally favorable to the pursuit of factual truth, that is, "pure" reason. This required that the practical issues of better and worse for people or the planet be excluded from consideration. The Wissenschaften pride themselves on being "value-free." The implication is that moral concerns are of lesser importance, that they do not belong in universities. Of course, the moral concerns about honesty and cooperation in research projects, etc., were in fact not dismissed. But questions of whether one use of the new information would be better for the world than another were excluded. The information would be made available to everyone or, at least, to everyone who could pay for the research. This whole approach has been brilliantly successful in gaining more and more information.

This ideal of radically separating “what is” from ideas of “what should be” now dominates higher education in the United States and, indeed, in the Western world. Sadly, it has spread to other parts of the planet. In earlier times one might well expect that those who are highly educated are likely to be highly reflective about the direction that individual lives and nations should go. University professors were expected to be wise. Today's education does not prepare them for that. It does mean that they are enormously well-informed in one important area. Nothing else. In my terminology, they are great scholars, but few of them are what we once called “intellectuals.” “Intellectuals seek wisdom rather than simply information.

Societies, governments, religious organizations and individual human beings need wisdom. Wisdom guides reflection integrating diverse matters into a larger context. People used to look to universities for wisdom. Reorganizing universities into collections of value free research institutions not only fails to generate wisdom but also fails to generate discussions of what is being lost. Perhaps Africans can initiate a global discussion of education that enables all to see the severe limitations of Wissenschaften.