Mark Van Doren's Liberal Education: A Symposium

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MARK VAN DOREN'S LIBERAL EDUCATION¹: A SYMPOSIUM

Upon the appearance recently of Mark Van Doren's Liberal Education a reviewer said that he had never encountered a book that closed so many doors and opened so many windows. Mr. Van Doren quietly closes the doors—the valves of his attention, as Emily Dickinson would say—upon the elective system, "practical" courses, specific indoctrination, and the fetish of objectivity. He opens the windows to let in some of the educational ideas of Socrates, St. Thomas Aquinas, Rousseau, Emerson, and many others. Van Doren knows what he means by an educated man, and he knows how alarmingly short of any ideal standard college graduates of recent years have been falling. He knows and is deeply disturbed by the simple fact that the educational system in recent years has offered too little to toughen the moral and intellectual fibre of human beings. He perceives thoroughly the evils of over-specialization and over-departmentalization in the academic world. He believes that education should help a student—any student—to discover the centrality of human experience. Best of all, he writes like a philosopher and a man and not like a committee of "educators."

All those who are afflicted with occupational apprehensiveness when change is mentioned, all who honestly and sincerely believe that knowledge can be furthered only by specialization and departmentalization, all who honestly believe that, pragmatism being our national philosophy, our fragmentary approach to learning is good enough, all who are complacent and do not care, all who honestly fear Mr. Van Doren's capitulation to neo-scholasticism—all these and many others will find objections to the book. And they should. Every teacher, every student, and every citizen of the republic had better allow himself to be bothered by this testament. If it hasn't the answers, it has many of the good questions.

The editors of the New Mexico Quarterly Review are glad to publish this symposium. Contributors were chosen on the basis of wide

geographical distribution and the variety of their specialized knowledge. Only two requests were made of contributors: that they keep away from book-review clichés and mere reporting of the contents, and that they write down very honestly their reactions to the book.

First to speak is C. V. Newsom, of the University of New Mexico, a mathematician and a brilliant teacher of mathematics:

The American is restless; his life is tied to a series of fads and movements. Few ideals are subjected to the “test of time,” for the American of the twentieth century is too impatient for that. This restless spirit is reflected in all American institutions. In education, as in government, the pendulum of ideas swings back and forth, and sometimes goes dizzily into a spin. We who observe these phenomena simply must admit that the symptoms of a growing race are often painful; America is still groping toward democracy.

During periods of national crisis, the process of growth involving the re-examination of institutions proceeds more rapidly. American education is at the heart of American existence, and it is proper and necessary that education for democracy should presently be debated. Unfortunately, constructive leadership for the essential controversy is lacking. Educational administrators have taken an oversimplified view of education; upon the authorization of their faculties, they have reduced education to an objective and quantitative science as they employ a clerical staff to measure the educational magnitude of their students in credits, grade points, and group requirements. Colleges of education can provide no guidance, for, in general, they are not accustomed to leadership; they have only sought to be acclaimed by a fickle public.

What approach, then, is possible in any serious attempt to study the nature of education for democracy? At the start, certain premises must be adopted. It should be acknowledged as an axiom that the basic elements in any true education are universal and permanent. Strength and morality within society must be recognized as the cumulative result of individuals able to accept responsibility. After that, in any study of the meaning of education, it is required that educated men be examined. No criterion for an education is needed to carry out this essential procedure; the students in a college will name those who are educated among their professors; your neighbor can designate the educated persons in your community.

How fortunate, then, that an educated man has treated the subject of education! Mark Van Doren’s *Liberal Education* is a perfect book; the analysis is thorough; the exposition is convincing; and the literary quality marks the work as unique in its brilliance.

According to Van Doren, “The powers of the person are what education wishes to perfect. To aim at anything less is to belittle men; to fasten somewhere on their exterior a crank which accident or tyrants can twist to set machinery going. The person is not machinery which others can run. His mind has its own laws, which are the laws of thought itself.” The education needed to accomplish such a purpose is liberal education, for “liberal education is nothing less than the complete education of men as men; it is the education of persons.” The petty question concerning
the particular fields which comprise the subject matter of a liberal education is completely eliminated in this important book—forever, it is hoped. The entire analysis makes it clear that "a liberal education is more than a classical education, more than an education in English literature, more than an education in what is called 'the humanities,' and more than a training in the moral virtues." "If science is master of the intellectual arts proper to the conduct of its affairs, then science is liberal too."

No one but a great citizen of democracy could argue, as does Mark Van Doren, that "A democracy that is interested in its future will give each of its members as much liberal education as he can take, nor will it let him elect to miss that much because he is in a hurry to become something less than a man. It is obvious that all cannot be philosopher-kings, but it is just as obvious that all must not be less than they are; and a democracy must be prepared to give the entire quantity of itself that can be taken." "[The citizen] can never blame a society which encouraged him to be all that he could be." "All men are specialists at last, but there is a time for choice and it is not the time of youth. Youth wants to be all things at once, and should be given a go at it. When the experiment is done, a specialty will announce itself. Meanwhile there is not the hurry we suppose there is—and so supposing, threaten our society with a caste system of predestined trades and professions such as democracy may find it difficult to survive."

The reader of Liberal Education may be surprised to learn that the trivium and the quadrivium are not dead. In fact, the argument is convincing that the substance of these seven traditional fields has become the skeleton of the modern liberal arts. "The liberal arts are the liberating arts. They involve memory, calculation, manipulation, and measurement, and call for dexterity of both mind and hand. Without these powers no mind is free to be what it desires." "The process of which [the educated man] is a product is the process of mastering the liberal arts." Certainly no man is ready to be a personality within a democracy until he is literate and articulate in verbal discourse, and possesses some facility in the use of mathematical symbolism; a person thus prepared has taken the first step toward a liberal education.

No greater sin is being committed against modern youth in the name of education than the pronounced tendency on the part of educators to ignore tradition. Mark Van Doren correctly asserts, "Tradition is so indispensable that it is regularly underrated, like other indispensable things. It is the medium through which we understand one another when communication takes place. It is the only way we have of knowing what we are." In their haste to be modern, educators generally are forgetting that knowledge of a few facts is not equivalent to understanding. True understanding and real appreciation require penetration; reasons must be discovered, and proper backgrounds must be acquired. How can a youth be taught principles of American citizenship without first studying the distinctive history of America, the first nation to be seriously committed to a democratic philosophy? The study of history has been so undervalued in the educational process that there is definite reason for some alarm; neither the present nor the future become intelligible except as they are interpreted in the light of the past. Who can use language with facility and confidence unless he has first studied those classical
languages now imbedded in our own, and has read from great literature written by masters of language? How can a person appreciate and understand nature if he has not first studied pure science and its language, mathematics? What nation is ready for peace unless its citizens have first learned to know and respect the history and culture of neighboring countries? How little this country appears to realize the hard requirements which peace makes of its people. Such a self-examination makes it seem obvious that responsibility to oneself and to others demands a maximum of individual development.

The goals of American democracy and the ideals of American education are the same. With proper education for our citizens, a great democracy is possible; without a wise educational program for youth, the dreams of America's founders shall never become reality. It is clear that Mark Van Doren understands the problem and the only approach to its solution.

C. V. Newsom

The next to speak is Melvin T. Solve, who has had several years of experience directing the co-operative course in the humanities at the University of Arizona:

Liberal education, according to Mr. Van Doren, is that which will produce the complete and therefore the liberated man, able to function in a world whose nature and laws he understands. The educated man will know that there is "no dry stretch between now and then. They are one river, and the more he knows about its length the better." A liberal education must teach man the essential unity of past and present, head and heart, man and nature, humanities and science. We must remember that knowing is knowing how to do. Most of this is very familiar, but not since Emerson have we had such a vigorous and readable statement. A century after Emerson wrote, our educational institutions are stillturning out "walking monsters,—a good finger, neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man." Emerson astonished his contemporaries by telling them that "Books are for the scholar's idle time." Mr. Van Doren is more moderate. Quoting Whitehead he tells us that "the second-handedness of the learned world is the secret of its mediocrity." Not only does Mr. Van Doren make war on the bookworms and the schismatics, but on the skeptic, and upon all authority not founded in the truth that makes the liberal man the only free man. With Pascal he says, "Not all the powers on earth can, by force of authority, persuade us of a point of fact, any more than they can alter it; for nothing can make that to be not which is." In a day of totalitarianism and "truth by edict" we need such faith in the power of the educated mind and heart.

The little book sums up most of what is worth knowing about the design for liberal education. And while the author quotes freely, he can turn a sentence as quotable as his quotations: "Religion is the art that teaches us what to do with our ignorance. It does not teach us how to convert it into knowledge, for that cannot be done. "But it shows us how it may be dignified with ritual, which is man's way of confessing his ignorance in a style suitable to its size."

The discussion of the relation between secondary school and college is less
satisfactory. Mr. Van Doren is aware that high schools do not regard preparation for college as their most important function. The attempts of the secondary schools to invade the liberal arts he deplores but does not explain. The reason for this invasion is, of course, that secondary-school administrators know that for the masses the high school is the terminal institution. Forty-one per cent of our population have had one to four years in high school, 19.6 per cent four years in the secondary schools. Only 12.3 per cent have had one year or more of college. We can not quarrel, therefore, with the high schools for their ambition to give to vast numbers of young people an orientation which will be of service to them as citizens and workers. Their problem becomes extremely difficult when we remember how short a time is at their disposal, and especially when we realize the pressure upon them to teach something "practical" which the young people can use in earning a living. Remembering his Plato, Mr. Van Doren has a word for the trade schools into which some of the "hand-minded" are deflected. But the trade schools are no complete solution to the problem of what to teach by way of the best preparation for life, because the graduates of the trade schools too are citizens who will have to make decisions as voters and parents—decisions which can be made only by the liberal mind which knows what happened before one was born.

Certainly the secondary schools can be blamed for abandonment of history and the older literature. Even the shortness of time at their disposal, especially when need seems to dictate the inclusion of vocational subjects, does not justify concentration upon contemporary literature and wishy-washy entertainment mistakenly called civics or citizenship. And certainly the secondary and the primary schools are severely to be blamed for failure to do a good job with the indispensable disciplines—reading, writing, and calculation. To these basic disciplines, taught to instill ideals of accuracy and habits of work, can be added more history and foreign language for those students who expect to enter college. College preparation will then no longer be a problem.

Like many another, Mr. Van Doren is admirable when he generalizes, but less happy when he comes to particulars. His return to the trivium and quadrivium as the basis of the curriculum of the liberal arts college surely has the weight of experience behind it. But his praise for the method of St. John’s College will fall coldly on many ears. Perhaps only the modernists who are all branch and no root will cavil at the reading of classics in literature and philosophy, but the reading of old books and sciences seems to many, including myself, a waste of time in the recapitulation of error. A student’s time is too precious to devote many hours to the reading of more of Lucretius, for instance, than books III and V. Even book III, noble as is its attempt to dispel the fear of death, will be rejected by all Christians. Books I and II do have three laws of physics imbedded in their curious melange of error, but the student without the assistance of a teacher would be unable to find them. Why a young person should be required to read the gropings of earlier ages in astronomy and medicine when he can get relatively accurate information from a despised modern textbook is far from clear to me. Mr. Van Doren has defined a classic as a book which is always contemporary—a very good definition. Hippocrates, Galen, Aristarchus, Gilbert, Harvey, and others in the St. John’s list definitely are not. Such men and their books belong to the history
only a small part of their work is still scientia. And second-handedness may as easily result from discussion of so-called classics as from study of modern textbooks, especially textbooks in science supplemented by laboratory work, even if the latter is "experiment" only by courtesy.

An important part of the book is that section devoted to the three-hundred-year feud between the humanities and the physical sciences. Mr. Van Doren castigates the professors of both, but with such sound good sense that both may profit. Logically and traditionally the sciences (at least mathematics and astronomy) are liberal subjects. Tradition and reason also support the idea that medicine and agriculture are "natural arts." This doctrine fits into his basic concept of the unity of all learning and all life. No sensible person can believe that science can be ignored by the liberal, that is, the complete man. One can only criticize the partial or the lop-sided man. And too many of our professional men are as narrow in their intellectual interests, taste, and language-skill as Sinclair Lewis's Doctor Kennicott of Main Street. And so far as completeness goes or true liberality, the concentration upon a single subject, even from the traditional seven—literature or music—provides no better result.

While readers may disagree with details, the book is wise and good tempered, vigorous without asperity, entertaining but not light.

George M. Peterson, of the University of New Mexico, is a psychologist of repute. His bewilderment, the editors can assure all readers, is honest and is not merely a literary device.

DEAR EDITOR:

This is a disturbing and confusing task you have given me. I started out thinking it would be great fun. We all like to discuss shop, more almost than anything, even in these days of the war. We professionals in liberal education, I mean. It would be fun, I thought, because I knew Mark Van Doren in a way, although he doesn't know me. He conducted a very interesting half-hour on the radio Sunday mornings, called "Invitation to Learning." He has been missing for about a year, and now I have found out what he has been up to; writing a book on liberal education. Well—his radio program was provocative. Surely the book would be great sport reading, even if I did have to pay somewhat closer attention than reading just for pleasure, in order to write about it later.

But now I am disturbed. Not provoked or concerned over a difference of opinion, but disturbed and confused over what the opinion is. Am I a stupid man that I cannot understand this book? Have I been miscast in the teaching profession for nearly twenty years now, or has, perhaps, the profession moved on, leaving me back in the 1920's, with nothing but ignorance of today's expression of its problems? Or did I never receive enough of a liberal education to be able to go along with the boys? This last could well be, for Mr. Van Doren himself has a chapter "Nobody Thinks He Is Educated," which might be re-titled, for me, "You Are Not Well Educated." Thenceforth, he would have me.

As it is, I am obstinate enough to want to fight back. When I can't understand
something, either I am stupid, or uneducated, or there is nothing to understand, just noise and confusion. I all too frequently run into scientific hypotheses I can't understand. They prove to me that I am uneducated, but I don't mind admitting it in such specialized fields. No man can be expected to know everything, and there is certainly a lot of everything in science to know these days. But in the field of education, not so much the kind exemplified in the colleges of education as the kind we mean when you and I talk shop, i.e., liberal education, I thought I knew enough to go along with the rest of the boys, even if my own thoughts were rather hum-drum. For example, Mr. Van Doren cites thirty-one writers, the majority of whom I have read, at least somewhat. Among them is John Dewey, who is not considered exactly easy reading. When I read his Democracy and Education, I thought I followed along, anyway. Hence, I'm not ready to admit stupidity, even if I don't consider myself the last word in erudition on this subject. But with Mark Van Doren's book, Liberal Education, either I am stupid, or he has written some noise and confusion. And so you see the chance I am taking writing this open letter to you. If you publish it, and others read and say they have no trouble understanding what Mr. Van Doren is saying, where does that leave me? Hence, I am obliged to put up the best defense I can at once. I'll say at the outset that the preface and first chapter seemed to go along all right. But in the second chapter, on "The Educated Person," I found my mind wandering as I read along. Perhaps this is because Mr. Van Doren tries to do justice to too many others who have previously been concerned with his subject. And in chapter three, I stumbled, over this, which I wish to quote now. I realize that removing a passage from its context is unfair, but if preceding passages were included, I doubt if there would be any added content to the following:

The circle of the relation between the state and the individual, a circle which is drawn when we say that each depends upon the other for its good, can be broken only if we distinguish between the individual and the person. The individual has no relation to anything except the state or society of which he is a member, and to which he is relative. But the person is not a member. He is the body of himself, and as such is always to be understood as an end, not a means. As a ruler, he has first ordered his own soul. As the ruled, he likewise orders his soul. And this is something which he is unique among creatures in knowing how to do, even though he may never do it perfectly. The good state—democracy—will let him try, on the theory that good citizenship will follow naturally from even moderate success; though it will let him try anyway. For without autonomy he cannot find the center in himself from which in fact emanate the very generosity and lawfulness, the respect for others that is a form of respect for himself, necessary to the operation of society at all. Society may command fear and obedience; it cannot force love or friendship, which are irreducibly personal, and developed in places to which politics as most conceive it has no access. Yet they are the foundation of good politics, which in this sense must be personal to succeed greatly. Democracy wants millions of one-man revolutions, if only because the result might be a nation of persons worth organizing. . . ." (pp. 39-40).

When I finished this I reread it, and then tried even again without success before deciding to go on to see if I could pick things up a little later on. I also tried the passage on a colleague, telling him in advance that I had trouble understanding what was meant, adding that I did not wish to suggest that he should do
likewise, but rather explain to me the meaning of the passage as he might explain something difficult in his special field to a student. His response was, "That is what is known as tossing words around."

Perhaps I am being unfair, for I admit picking out one of the most esoteric passages in the book. But as I went on reading, it appeared that I never could quite clinch with an idea, for it always danced about and away from me, thus:

A liberal education is more than a classical education . . . [though the latter] ought to be a great thing [for although] Greek literature is not everything, yet it is the heart of what we need to know. . . . [A classical education acquaints] the student with the "beauties" of two literatures. . . . Literature is a means to something bigger than itself. . . . It is seldom that great books in English are greatly read. . . . Literary scholarship as we know it is most at home among the small books it can explain . . . The sciences were too much admired for knowing clearly what they wanted to do. . . . Liberal education is not everything except science . . . [which] has no doubt of its importance. . . . Champions in "the humanities" . . . are of course correct in insisting that they are necessary rather than nice. . . . A legend persists that science is not humane . . . [but] the Greeks were scientists. . . . To the extent that the "humanities" . . . are rearming "humanism" . . . they will take us only part way to a liberal education. . . . The conscious business of education is with the intellect. . . . [There is] danger in separating character from intellect. . . . Liberal education is more than literary education, or moral education, or both. . . . [It] tries to be intelligent about virtue. . . . [Its] prime occupation . . . is with the skills of being. . . . [Its aim is] not merely to know or do, but also, and indeed chiefly, to be. . . . Our talk of it, however, has been general long enough. . . . (Chapter IV).

Shall we, then, get specific? If we do, it is on pages 150-152 where the curriculum of St. John's College is listed in its famous best books. Aside from this listing, I failed to find where. But I might be specific about how Van Doren seems almost insistently to avoid specificity. If you will pardon two more short quotations, they are: (p. 116) "Doubtless all studies are one study in the end" and, on p. 117, in discussing subject-matter, "Any list might do. . . ." Any list that Mr. Van Doren happened to be thinking of might do, and all studies he had in mind might be one study. But I know a student transferring from one institution to another who submitted, among other courses for which she had received credit, a course in training to be a drum-majorette. While I recognize that this "course" might conceivably be related to music—one of the quadrivium—I have a suspicion that he who believes that any list will do and that all studies are one study could find himself including a drum-major's course in his curriculum, and I rebel. While I may be prejudiced, this seems to me the kind of thing liberal education should move away from today, and any generality that leads us in the wrong direction is accordingly weakened. I suspect that Mr. Van Doren might be incensed at the interpretation just given and could easily contradict it with other evidence from his book, but he should bear in mind that misinterpretations are not always error on the part of the reader, but frequently weakness on the part of the writer.

We could run on in this fashion regarding the interpretation of other passages, but, I'd rather tell you that I finished the book and laid it aside for some time before writing this. When I turned to the writing, I took the book up again and
reread large sections of it to make sure I was not wholly mistaken. The preface
promises a theory which it hopes will not be vague. It will evidently concern,
among other things, what to do about science. But when I returned to hunting
this theory down, the best that I could find, except for some vague generalities,
was the St. John’s curriculum. Is this, then, what Mr. Van Doren would do about
science? If so, I cannot believe that he will get many scientists to agree with him.
I have no right to speak for scientists, but can speak as a layman concerning
the education of my son. I hope he gets a scientific education and believe it can
be done better than by studying the scientific curriculum in the St. John’s list.
For example, his physiology there appears limited to Bernard and Harvey, both
classics, I admit, but do I want him to have physiological classics or modern
physiology? I am convinced my son will learn more physiology from, let us say,
Howell or its equivalent and from a teacher who bases his class work around such
material, than from these classics. Not more classics, mind you, but more physiology.
The question reduces itself to what I want him to have, classics or science, or if
you prefer the phraseology, scientific classics or modern science. I want him to have
modern science. If someone else wants his son to have scientific classics, he can
attend St. John’s, if it will accept him. I hope that liberal education will not
follow a trend that will prevent me from making a choice, or force me into selecting
a technical school. My argument regarding physiology can be applied to physics,
chemistry, or any other scientific field. If my son wishes to avoid as much science
as possible (I hope he won’t want to avoid any kind of education) and prepare in
“the humanities,” I’m not sure that the same kind of argument does not apply.
In fact, I don’t see why he cannot get a modern liberal education, including both
science and the humanities, without the emphasis St. John’s gives to the classics.
I do not wish this to be an invective against the St. John’s curriculum, for there
are unquestionably many fine things to be said for it, but I am convinced that
Mr. Van Doren has not said them in his book, and also convinced that he has not said
much else that can be held on to and discussed, either calmly or belligerently.
And so I return to my original point. I have run the risk of being charged with
stupidity for getting nothing but vague generalities from Mr. Van Doren’s book.
If another reader gets something more, I would appreciate having it explained
to me simply and explicitly. And if it is obviously possible to do all this, I would
appreciate further your doing me the personal favor of destroying this letter, so
that my ignorance will not cause me painful embarrassment.

Sincerely,

GEO. M. PETERSON

Long known as a thorough scholar and a fine teacher, Aaron Schaffer,
professor of romance languages, University of Texas, former president
of the South Central Modern Language Association, calls attention,
we feel, to a decided weakness in Van Doren’s position:

The writer, as well as the reviewer, of a book on liberal education lays himself
open, on two scores, to the charge of presumptuousness; for he specifically states
that he knows what a liberal education is and he implies, though he may make
modest disclaimers to the contrary, that he is himself a liberally educated person. But any thoughtful teacher is justified in running this risk and in venturing to formulate a philosophy of higher education in a democracy by the painfully obvious fact that a large number of the graduates of our “colleges of arts and sciences” can scarcely, by any standard, be said to have received a broad and sound education. One explanation for this phenomenon, of course, lies in the complete lack of agreement among college teachers as to what constitutes such an education. The University of Texas, for example, has a Committee on Educational Policy specially appointed by the president to inquire into and make recommendations regarding the advisability of adapting, by radical changes where necessary, our present system to the needs of a war-time and post-war United States. The dean of our College of Arts and Sciences, alarmed at the speed with which our A. B. degree is being reduced to a narrowly professional or pre-professional set of disciplines, has pleaded repeatedly for the retention and strengthening of liberal education as the backbone of this degree. As the Committee is heavily weighted with representatives of the sciences and the professional schools, the unhappy dean has received support from only a small minority; from the majority, his demands that we cease neglecting “liberal education” and the “humanities” are countered by equally insistent demands for definitions of these terms and by statements that such subjects as cost-accounting, electrical engineering, and homemaking are at least as “liberal” and as “humane” as is the study of language and literature. Under such circumstances, one may well wonder how we are ever going to emerge from the impasse.

But Mr. Van Doren knows what liberal education is and he has charted our course out of the impasse. The milestones along this course are the 110 authors whose writings constitute the required reading of all the students at St. John’s College in Maryland; the administrative heads of this college, frequently quoted in Liberal Education, are apparently responsible for Mr. Van Doren’s conviction that “an educated society is one whose members know the same things” (p. 111). As a graduate of a relatively small, privately endowed institution, Johns Hopkins University, and as a teacher at a relatively large, publicly supported institution, the University of Texas, I have somewhat divided sentiments with regard to Mr. Van Doren’s convictions and his program. I am inclined to believe that much of his reasoning is either contradictory or mere quibbling. This is particularly true of his categorical assertion that “there is no such thing as education for democracy; education is either good or bad” (p. 38). It can scarcely be denied that education attained a high level in Germany, where the basic notions of Lehrfreiheit and Lernfreiheit were born and reared; yet Germany produced, within sixty years, a William I, a Bismarck, a William II, and a Hitler. The point is, of course, that when Mr. Van Doren asseverates that “education is either good or bad,” he is begging some important questions: Good or bad according to whose standards? Good or bad for whom? And it seems somewhat paradoxical to insist that, by submitting all undergraduates to the regimentation of reading the same 110 authors, we shall emerge with a superior form of democracy. And I do not quite understand why a man who exalts religion as does Mr. Van Doren (p. 141) should be so afraid of “education for character” (pp. 58 et seq.). As a Jew (with a thoroughly religious upbringing, be it noted), I should much prefer, for obvious reasons, that
we continue to leave the religious training of our students to the home and the
church. When an educator, however generous his intentions may be, publicly
advocates the introduction of "religion" into our teaching, I am naturally disposed
to ask: Whose religion? To my way of thinking, the best teachers, in any sort
of college, are those who, without actively assuming the role of the preacher, let
the example of their own devotion to the truth and the implications of the materials
they present function in the process of the moulding of the characters of their more
or less impressionable students. In other words, Mr. Van Doren may be taxed with
at least a measure of that "asphyxiating" dogmatism of which he accuses the
scientists (p. 139).

With many of Mr. Van Doren's basic contentions, however, I am at least in
partial agreement. I share whole-heartedly his conviction that the A.B. degree
should be granted only to the student who has manifested some familiarity with
all the great areas of human thought and feeling. We need to inculcate into our
students a love for good books and an eagerness to read more and more of them.
I should not myself insist on all the 110 authors of the St. John's program (I frankly
admit that, though I consider myself a fairly well-read man, I have read only about
half of the works listed); but it would seem to me to be a good plan to put some
such list into the hands of every incoming freshman who plans to take the A.B.
degree and to encourage him by every available means to make the best possible
use of it. I also agree with Mr. Van Doren that life in a democracy is a profession
in itself and that our present professional curricula produce craftsmen rather than
educated "persons." The St. John's plan as such, however, seems to me to be fitted
only to our smaller liberal arts colleges; its practical execution calls for an
instructional scheme—small classes, the tutorial system, comprehensive examinations
—which it would be extremely difficult to adapt to the huge student bodies of our
large state universities. For these latter, the best solution of the problem would
seem to lie in a very careful selection of the teachers who give the courses leading
to the A.B. degree. When all is said and done, it is the great teachers, whatever
may be their subjects, who afford their students the greatest opportunities for
intellectual improvement. And as this sort of improvement is the subject of Mr.
Van Doren's book, it is to be hoped that the book will be widely read by teachers
in our colleges and universities.

AARON SCHAFFER

Martha G. Colby, whose "December the Seventh: Shock Therapy for American Education" was reprinted in our preceding issue, there insisted upon a little plain, old-fashioned "toughness" and a return to standards of achievement. Mrs. Colby is a research associate in the elementary school of the University of Michigan and a member of the psychology department in the same institution.

It is said that poets are the prophets of the future. If so, posterity will thank
Mark Van Doren for speaking out in Liberal Education. He hopes that teachers
and students will hear and heed him. We hope that legislators, school boards,
rich alumni, and parents do so too. The former is likely, the latter not. For the
author is a poet, a teacher, a philosopher—not a journalist, “educator,” or
statistician. His concern is living, not mere livelihood. And there is an ancient
saying that “Those whose ways are different do not make plans together.” This, I
believe, is the first and greatest obstacle to Mr. Van Doren’s goal.

The second is his under-estimation of biogenetic problems. No matter what we
hope about intelligence, its course shows nothing more clearly than the law of
“regression to the average,” at least since the classical age. Anthropologists tell us
our legs grow apace, but the organ of thought seems to lag. Universal education
must conform to the average, likewise the sub-average and superior. And as any
class-room teacher knows, this is a practical dilemma with more horns than can
even be listed here.

Our era is industrial. It may be materialistic, commercial, utilitarian, but here it is. Until, like all other “transient figments of history,” it destroys or transcends itself, we who live in it are of it. Combined with the “law of the average,” none too high in abstraction, this means more, not fewer trade schools. But lest the hand annihilate the head that ought to guide it, it also calls for the maximum instead of our lethal minimum of training in abstraction processes. It has taken a war to shock back our common sense about the three R’s. For masses of people, these are the limits of “formal” liberal education. If solid enough in substance, these grammar school tools will carve equilibrium whatever its future level. Mr. Van Doren too easily assumes good primary education. Actually, its chaos is the sore spot. But education is a circular process, and its end may determine its beginning. Wherever colleges have resisted lower entrance standards, the higher have been met.

For this reason, the experiment at St. John’s College is a crucial one, toward which all hopeful eyes should turn. It is unfortunate that only “the books” are known, while the manner of digesting them is not. Most teachers feel some trepidation, knowing what sheer ocular mechanics the verb “to read” may mean. Surely the classics were addressed to peers, not adolescents. To read them is a scholar’s sacrament, which must not become a layman’s sacrilege. Men misread the Bible and there were inquisitions. More recent men have misread science and there are racial purges. Better, perhaps, that common minds know just the common text-books than that they bend the gods themselves to darkened ends.

Neither Van Doren nor Scott Buchanan mean, of course, for this to happen, for they use democratic education in its Jeffersonian sense. But this will come of age only when superior students, rich or poor, may go to college, and when inferior students, rich or poor, may not. There should be many more scholarships (much more rigorously selective), but the same selection should, in fairness, be applied to all.

There is no surer sign of blinded insight than the semantic pandemonium called educational theory. One thinks these days of Job,—“Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?” or of Confucius, “He who does not know words cannot understand men.” We must therefore thank Mr. Van Doren deeply for his special service as a man of letters. He liberates from stereotype such symbols as “discipline,” “memory,” “self-reliance,” “character,” “democratic,” “liberal,” and makes them glow again in freedom from pedantry.
If Mr. Van Doren's sure and pointed pen has done nothing else than expose the fraudulent disjunction between the "human arts" and the "inhumane sciences," it will have served a worthy end. The cost of this broken unity in education is just beginning to be clear enough to frighten us. Philosophers have warned us in a lofty dialectic, but perhaps a poet's epigrams will drive it home. "What is to be done about science?" asks the author. There is nothing to be "done" about pure science,—its own vitality generates momentum, and it now avoids the errors of the Greeks. The problem is the moral value of its gadgets. Science is no more responsible for bombs than words are responsible for pornography. Man is accountable for both. We should ask, not what can man do about science, but what can science and the arts do about man.

Yet here lies an interesting problem. To many, it seems inexplicable that the soaring fantasies, the concepts, of modern science have no counterpart in the sensuous wallowing of modern art or the sterile statistics of social science. Where are the creative analogues of Relativity, the Uncertainty Principle, or Quantum Theory? Perhaps, in aping the external machinery of the scientific method, the "humanities" have lost their own gods. "For the gods," says Santayana, "are demonstrable only as hypotheses, but as hypotheses they are not gods."

Where great minds hesitate, perhaps our lesser ones should halt, forbearing practical suggestion. But if in product a past plan seems better than a present, it is not wholly a fallacy of Idola Theatri to suggest it. . . . There was a little public high school in the desert, not too long ago,—which had an educational design for living. There was a Classical Course, for all who even dreamed of going to college. Its core was clear, uncompromising: four years each of English, history, and mathematics, with an elective laboratory science in the senior year; three years each of classical and modern language. Music and drawing were extracurricular, but mandatory, for no one left those doors illiterate in the arts. There were then, as now, vocational courses for those not wanting, or unequal to, the other. But only the Latin and latter half of mathematics were concessions to the kitchen and the shop. Failures meant "repeats" and these were infinitely less disgraceful than to "stop." Children learned "character" in the home and school room every living minute, for parents were not yet reduced to purse-strings and chauffeurs, and teachers were respected, not derided. "Citizenship" they learned by knowing how people struggled for it down the ages, and by engraving in their hearts and tongues,—(yes, rote!) the preamble of the Constitution. The brick and mortar of that school were very simple, but the classics were on its shelves, the test-tubes were in its laboratories, and teachers of liberal training were at its desks. They did not know all the skillful methods now available, but unlike our moderns, they did not stumble into Paracelsus' tragedy,—refusing "Calm converse with the great dead, soul to soul, Who laid up treasure . . . ;" "Rejecting past example, practice, precept,"

Aidless mid these he thinks to stand alone: [while]
Thick like a glory round the Stagirite,
Your rivals throng, the sages . . . .
I believe some form of this earlier design for training is one way toward Mr. Van Doren's liberal education.

Deeply devoted to the task of correlating humanistic and democratic values and to the idea that education must be purposefully integrated with social aims, Joseph W. Cohen, professor of philosophy, University of Colorado, attacks the book at what seems to us its most vulnerable point.

I shall confine myself to Mr. Van Doren's view of man and society, democracy and personality, because in this view, I believe, lies the weakness and futility of his position.

Liberal educators, he tells us, should attend to their proper business, teaching the trivium and quadrivium. They should ignore current institutions and events, abjure concern or passion for democracy, dismiss talk of society. The perils of reaction at home and fascism abroad disturb him so little that they are never once mentioned even by indirection. There is no echo in this work of the holocaust loosed upon our world. Having thus assured himself of complete insulation from issues of war or peace, from questions of social justice, social growth or decay, from the problems of the relation of mind and will to action, he proceeds to praise knowledge, discipline, and virtue and to seek, through their abstract aid alone, educational salvation. In the end liberal education, through the instrumentality of the great classics, will generate millions of enriched personalities who may eventually make "millions of one-man revolutions" and save mankind from evil.

Mr. Van Doren is oblivious of the poet's warning:

"Things fall apart: the centre cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. The blood-dimmed tide is loosed and everywhere The ceremony of innocence is drowned."

For it is a ceremony of innocence which Van Doren performs in this discussion of liberal education.

There is, to be sure, a mediocre cant of "Education for citizenship," but there is also a noble cant of "Education for personality." The former is all machinery, administrative activity, and a doctrine of adjustment to the community in terms of worldly success. The latter is all truth and beauty and goodness, and the eternal values of the personality divorced from the crudities of human experience and conflict. The one is an uncritical cult of process, active, pragmatic, and contemporaneous; the other is an equally uncritical cult of values resident in the isolated and cultivated personality, contemplative, edifying, and traditional. The former is all superstructure without roots; the latter all roots—and very ancient ones—without superstructure. These two groups of educators speak no common language. They rarely get together. But American democracy and American education are the victims of both. Neither group leads to a mature understanding of the nature and
meaning of a democratic society and neither produces the education which can best
serve that society's needs. Missing from both positions is the comprehension that
the cultural trusteeship of education must be linked to a social responsibility
which is urgently aware of a rising tide of unreason that in our society threatens
progressive civilization everywhere. Confronted by the crisis of humanity, both
groups make manifest, the one practically, the other spiritually, the bankruptcy
of individualism. The one sanctifies the status quo directly by its cult of education
for individual success in the world as it is; the other, indirectly, by its abstract
counsels of perfection for isolated personalities impotent in their traditionalism
and isolation to influence society for good or ill. The real sources of corruption,
which impoverish citizenship, constrict cultural horizons, and endanger the future
of civilization, remain unanalyzed and unaffected by either group. The narrow
individualism of both groups breeds fear or contempt of the world-wide organized
struggle for participation in civilization and for shared material and cultural well-
being. This inner democratic dynamic of society, the key to progress in our day,
is scrupulously ignored. Both are blind, therefore, to the counter-threats of aggressive
and irresponsible power which have already crystallized on so vast a scale in the
form of modern fascism and have already destroyed all vestiges of liberal education
on the continent of Europe.

The primary need of American education is precisely a sense of social purpose,
a will to democracy, as the condition of a just society. This sense alone will give
higher learning a new attitude of responsibility for making some impact upon the
quality of our common citizenship, for giving direction and strength to those social
groups wholly dependent upon democratic advance, and for giving pause to others
now headed for reaction.

Mr. Van Doren proffers us counsels largely irrelevant to the grim urgencies of
our times—the compensatory comforts of a contemplative individualism couched in
the language of the Platonic and medieval tradition. In the process, indeed, he
believes the intense concern for justice and the community which constantly permeates
the work of Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas. These men were not individualists.
I hope the time will soon come when spokesmen for the liberal arts will abandon
the profitless pretense of being spectators sub specie aeternitatis while ignoring the
society which they might so ably serve. It is a pose which has robbed them of
vitality, which has produced a great gap between the creative life outside and the
teaching mind behind academic walls, between the university graduate and the
common man, between the values of democracy and the values of higher education.
Divorced from the context of our society Mr. Van Doren's book expresses ideas
and ideals in a vacuum. His interpretation of the meaning of a liberal education,
its curricular content, the interrelation of its essential aspects and levels, is often
wise and searching; but his underlying assumptions about the individual and society
leave his discussion abstract and truncated, and lead him only to the single
expedient of the St. John's experiment with the classics.

The slogan of the Van Doren group of educational theorists might well be the
title of a book by a contemporary theologian, Moral Man and Immoral Society.
Their aim is apparently to have no commerce with the category of the social. It is
the bete noire of these "absolutists of the past," these "priests of the eternal," if I may
paraphrase in reverse Mr. Van Doren’s derogatory designation of those who soberly study the facts of institutional change and seek an understanding and a reorientation of values in the light of such change. Or is it more charitable to assume that Mr. Van Doren cannot discriminate between those whom I have referred to above as devotees of the cant of citizenship and those who are responsible analysts of their society and probe seriously the educational implications of democracy and culture?

What we need with desperate urgency in the humanities is teachers who can interpret cultural achievement, the great works of thought and imagination, in terms of a knowledge of social forces, economic, political, and psychological, and can correlate that knowledge with factors scientific, philosophical, religious, and imaginative. We need teachers who have grown beyond mere hero-worship of cultural personality rather than teachers who have nothing but contempt for the sciences of society. The liberal arts might then manifest a virile concern for social justice in terms of knowledge of the conditions which foster or hinder it. They might find the basis for an integrated curriculum in the recognition that “liberal” in the term “liberal arts” should mean liberating for society as well as liberating for the individual. But the problem does not exist for Mr. Van Doren. It is a problem of socializing our education, and society has been excluded from his context. He points to the solitude of classicists, scientists, and philosophers, to the fragmentation of learning, the absence of significant integration. It is my opinion that the cause for this educational malaise is the absence among educators of a shared conviction of social responsibility to build a firmer foundation for the humanities in the structure of the community’s life and hopes. If they possessed that conviction they would not stand aloof from the world and from each other pleading the need for objectivity and disinterestedness; sceptical and non-committal about social values; cautious, fearful, and distrustful of public action; intimidated by pressures direct and indirect; unaware of the dangers lurking in their unexamined personal and social bias which creeps into their teaching and moulds their students. These are the subjective factors which can, and often do, undermine the integrity of teachers and which lead to a species of academic introversion, to idiosyncracy and retirement into specialties.

Mr. Van Doren makes one apparently important concession to democracy. He grants that education should be for all, that all men without exception deserve the best education to be had according to their capacity to benefit from it. To much such universal education a reality would suggest the need for the analysis of public policy and the advocacy of public action, which alone can assure it. But Van Doren’s general philosophy of education provides no clue to the forces which promote or prevent the realization of the best education for all. He is freed from that responsibility since public policy is not the educator’s proper business, the truth being, in fact, that he distrusts all public policy. His earlier identification of education and democracy becomes meaningless when, in a revealing passage, he turns to contemplate the visage of the actual democratic state. This passage is a catalogue of his fears: fear of the “specious faiths usable by ruthless individuals for their private ends”; fear of “the political religions which now endanger our most elementary liberties”; fear that the bewildered citizen will be unable to
differentiate the false from the true prophets or arrive at a decision about what is just and unjust. In other words, the democratic state is not to be trusted.

Who will educate our educators in the knowledge of the nature of the modern state and modern democracy? This passage is either an expression of political naivete or of traditional laissez-faire. For Van Doren action by the state is either corrupt or it is dangerous to individual liberty. Democracy, therefore, can mean nothing to him other than a narrow traditional individualism. This is an interpretation which ignores one hundred years of slow advance in the emergence of the positive state which acts not merely to protect the individual from interference but to further the common good. If men cannot act together and, through the agency of government, assure and safeguard a civilized existence, then the few who can afford it might just as well go to St. John's and fortify their isolated personalities with the comfort of the great classics of a civilization in demise. The rest of mankind can wait in vain for the realization of the best education for all.

JOSEPH W. COHEN

The editors will welcome statements on the subject of liberal education by any reader of Van Doren's book or of this symposium. Naturally, the editors must choose among contributions and cannot promise to print them all. Statements should not exceed 350 words.