

“Ce sont les morts qui parlent” (The Dead Speak): T. S. Eliot on Education

“Unless we mean by education that very modest amount of knowledge which can be imparted by mass-instruction, we have no more a right to education than we have to happiness, genius or beauty. So far as we have “rights,” every man or woman has the right to be educated to some useful function in the community; but what is meant by education must differ greatly in kind. . . . My own education was very defective; but I have known much better educated men than I to be completely baffled by the complexities of modern civilization. And here again a question seems to be begged. Might it not be well to consider these complexities and to try to simplify some of them, so that simple people like myself should not be crushed by the burden of the right to so much education?”

--October 1931 Commentary for *The Criterion* (Collected Prose 4.355-356)

“[O]nly a proper system of education can unify the active and the contemplative life, action and speculation, politics and the arts” --*Idea of a Christian Society* (C&C 33).

“To be interested in one’s art, instead of being merely interested in one’s own success – even in the best meaning of the word “success” – is no innate faculty which one either possesses in some degree or does not possess. It is a faculty which, however endowed with it one may be in the fresh years, must be cultivated to the end. To an age not much occupied with moral askesis, which is taught that it is more important that the growing plant should not be *warped* than that it should be *trained*, and which is not even taught that growth itself should be the activity of a lifetime, and not merely of arbitrarily restricted “formative years,” this suggestion of the profound moral problem involved in what appears such a simple manifestation of good-nature as being kind to young poets, may appear fantastic. And even when I say “moral problem” I suppose I must say what one ought to be able to take for granted, that the moral and the intellectual cannot be separated, and that mental sloth is sin.”

--*Views and Reviews [III] The New English Weekly*, 7 (12 Sept 1935) (Collected Prose 5.269)

“A theory of Education, again, depends upon having a view of the nature of the Good Society, as well as an accurate understanding of the present state of society, and this brings us back to theology. A critique of modern education must be a critique of liberalism and secularism, two doctrines to which the most powerful forces in education for over a century have been committed.”

--Private memorandum for the Archbishops’ Commission in Training for the Ministry (Collected Prose 5.636-637)

In his role as a critic and writer, T. S. Eliot was periodically concerned with the issue of education, both public and Christian, and he addressed a variety of religious and non-religious audiences about both the philosophy and pragmatics of the subject. At times, he spoke as a Christian, as a citizen, as a poet, or as a public intellectual. Some of his most important contexts were specifically Christian, such as his involvement with J. H. Oldham’s Christian think-tank, The Moot (1938-1944), the 1937 Oxford Conference on Church, Community, and State, and the Archbishop of York’s 1941 Malvern Conference. Eliot addressed the topic in essays for *The Christian News-Letter* and in response (over the BBC) to the 1948 Lambeth Conference Report. He also spoke, among other institutions, to Methodist Boys and Girls schools. His 1950 lectures at the University of Chicago, printed as *The Aims of Education*, were clearly for a more diverse audience, as was the annual Kirkland Lecture for the Kirkland School Association Trust in 1959.

Eliot himself taught in various contexts at different stages of his life. In 1912, he served as an assistant in Philosophy at Harvard. In 1915-16, he was a teacher for a term at High Wycombe Grammar School, then at Highgate Junior School until the end of 1916. From 1916-1919, he

gave Extension lectures for the Oxford University Extension Delegacy and the University of London Extension Board. In 1933, as the Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard, he taught the course, “English Literature 1890 to the Present Day.”

Taken together, Eliot’s position was to defend traditional classics education on the grounds of the continuing value of humanities studies, especially for the development of wisdom and understanding, and for most of his mature career, Eliot held that the justification for this purpose was ultimately a Christian one.

Key Emphases

1. Very early in his career, Eliot recommended the value of education in Greek and Latin literature, as well as European literature in general. This stress continued throughout his life upon different grounds but all involving some understanding of tradition.
2. Eliot used the term *tradition* in three different, if overlapping, senses: a) an artistic set of evolving practices; b) local, regional collections of cultural rituals and beliefs; and c) a philosophical or theological “atmosphere of living thought.”
3. Education, he held, is partially about the awareness of the temporal, historicist flux. This includes the recognition that culture needs education for preservation, remembrance, and adaptation.
4. Cultural development includes recognizing or recovering the permeant things, i.e. the eternal values. This development includes recognizing the larger civilizational heritage shared by cultures, but also the regional differences that in their rivalry help spur cultural creativity.
5. Eliot came to hold that education should have as its end wisdom, or even holiness, and that an education for vocational success was not sufficient. But at the same time, he did not think that an education in the classics is for everyone.
6. An education in the classics offers the possibility of cultural recovery, but also the possibility of developing *prudentia*. Eliot saw history as being one aspect of the education for wisdom, provided it studied past human action for moral and spiritual values. Education in past literature prepares us to enter imaginatively into past worldviews.
7. A true education is a preparation for orthodoxy, as well as a guard against heresy because true education prepares the person for self-judgment and “understanding the judgments of the experience of the race” (Prose 4.315).
8. Eliot stressed the importance of the classics of Greece, Rome, and Israel, both to the Church and to the West and held that while Christianity was dependent on neither Europe nor the classics that European education could not remain Christian without a study of them.
9. Eliot placed this understanding within the structure of nature and grace, and he stressed that education needs a telos appropriate to the human person. At the same time, he admitted that appeals to natural law were not likely to carry as much weight with non-Christians.
10. Without a clear telos, the organization of education is haphazard because we must know what the end of persons are if we are to know what kind of society we wish to produce.
11. Eliot did not trust the planning and regulation of public education by the State and thought it better for education to be organized by the institutions and their traditions. He also thought that modern literature should be mostly left for students to discover on their own.
12. He thought that British university education needed to return to an ecclesial mission, run by a religious hierarchy, with its faculty serving in a quasi-clerical role. Practically, of course, his appeals were seldom based on this, but he felt that a religious vision was always at the heart of education: the question is—which one?

Selected Readings

“Modern Education and the Classics” (1933/36)

Eliot argues that the crisis in education is a religious question because education is oriented by one’s philosophy of life, and technical effectiveness is a false foundation for education, as is simple economic and societal advancement. He saw the American push for large-scale university education an endemic of where things were going—a self-perpetuating system that created a need for more and more students of increasingly inferior quality and an eventual weakening of the quality of the curriculum.

Eliot organizes the rest of his discussion around three categories: liberal, radical, and orthodox. The liberal approach tends to either over-theoretical or overtechnical training and thus to overspecialization. The study of Latin and Greek is slighted. The radical approach tends to eliminate anything from the past it considers no longer apropos to its agenda, which means an overemphasis on current scientific training. The orthodox approach ultimately supports the Christian faith, and an apologia for the classics must finally rest upon tradition, and tradition’s ultimate rationale is a religio-cultural one. For the classics to survive they must be taught within institutions that value Christianity and wish to perpetuate “Christian civilization” (Prose 5.343).

Questions for Consideration

- Is Eliot’s critique of American university education fair? Why and/or why not?
- Is he correct that a study of the Greek and Roman classics, along with the later medieval and early modern tradition, is necessary to maintain Western Christian civilization?

“The Classics and the Man of Letters” (1942)

Eliot sets out to make a case for why the study of Greek and Latin should remain part of basic liberal arts education. Placed against the larger civilizational whole, the “man of letters,” that is the educated writer of the ranks below the great geniuses, is formed by a literary tradition immersed in the classics. Latin as prose has an influential part in English prose, as do Greek and Latin classics in traditional educated culture. The loss of a common culture for study weakens the quality of literary and cultural criticism in part because no audience of substantial size remains to engage it. The training of the writer involves a sufficiently varied and general collection of texts. So the educational dilemma is how to provide enough variety yet enough shared variety.

Eliot makes the case that discipleship is a motive for education for varying reasons. History, logic, and philosophy help teach what language is for and how it has been employed, so study of Greek and Latin, as well as modern languages is of value, as is other language study outside the European tradition, such as Hebrew or Chinese. “[G]rowing a pattern of values” is a spiritual agenda of immense proportions for it deals with societal structural levels. Thus, the reading of much of this tradition in translation is also a practical necessity.

Questions for Consideration

- Did you study Latin or Greek in your education? Has it been valuable? Would it be?
- Is Eliot correct that the person of letters needs a common core of shared texts to study and be formed by?
- What would you suggest for a common core of texts if you could?

- Is discipleship a necessary element of education?

“What is a Classic?” (1944)

In his inaugural address to the Virgil Society, Eliot purposely chooses a different sense of the classic than what he had used in the two essays above. In this address, the classic is the work that:

- Is the product of a master who is a part of a mature civilization
- Is representative of a mature literature that has realized its possibilities for poetry and especially prose
- Is the product of a community of taste that has developed a common style
- Has realized the full possibilities of that language
- Has a developed debt to another older literature than the national one
- Possesses comprehensiveness and universality
- Provides a criterion for a subsequent tradition

Thus, Shakespeare cannot be a classic since he does not represent a mature culture and language, neither can Milton since his work owes more to Latin than English and does not leave a possibility for future generations. Pope is the product of a mature culture but only realizes limited possibilities of its language. Goethe possesses many of these qualities but is limited to German Romantic culture and is thus not representative of the larger European tradition. Only Virgil (and perhaps Dante) can be the classic for Europe. Eliot admits, however, that for the purposes of English literature, it is well that the greatest English writers have only exhausted any one aspect of the language’s possibilities.

At the same time, Eliot insists that the notion of a classic as a kind of limit idea is still necessary. Without a sense of a larger tradition that such a notion implies, we lack the possibility of wisdom and fall into provincialism.

Questions for Consideration

- How convincing are Eliot’s criteria here for an ideal classic? Explain.
- Is such a criterion necessary?
- Is Eliot correct that without the notion of a classic, there is only knowledge and no wisdom?

Chap. 6. “Notes on Education and Culture: and Conclusion” of *Notes towards a Definition of Culture* (1948)

Eliot begins by reviewing a number of proposals for the purpose of education:

That the purpose of education must be stated,

which Eliot stresses is the transmission of culture and not political or social change per se.

That education makes us happier,

but not if trained beyond one’s social location and tastes.

That everyone wants to be educated, though at high levels Eliot thinks is overrated.

That education is for equality of opportunity, which Eliot finds impossible.

That education should help uncover and utilize the most intelligent, but Eliot doubts this is historically true or even necessary.

Wisdom, learning, and knowledge are, Eliot argues, a more solid purpose for education than the pragmatics of cultural superiority or experiential learning, so education should not attempt to replace what family and class can do, nor should the state try to regulate and over-plan education.

Eliot criticizes strongly the document *The Churches Survey Their Task*, a product of the 1937 Oxford Conference on Church, Community, and State, because in assuming that education's purpose is to perpetuate current culture it smuggles in two destructive assumptions: 1) that the State's role is to manipulate and develop that culture through systematic planning, and 2) that the wisdom and holiness of the past is to be replaced by the evolving culture of modernity.

Questions for Consideration

- Should public education be systematically planned by governments? Why and/or why not?
- Do Eliot's views on family and culture address the problem of the breakdown of families in many parts of modern society? Should they?
- Is Eliot's position elitist? Is it undemocratic? Does that matter?

The Aims of Education (1950)

1. Can Education Be Defined?

Eliot begins by admitting to some justice in Robert Hutchins's critique of his chapter on education in *Notes*. "Education" and "educated" can mean differing things, depending upon whether he were speaking of what teachers do or what the student does, or what the subject to be mastered was. Nevertheless, Eliot explores a long analogy to suggest that defining education does not necessarily solve the problem here. The claiming, for example, that education is about suiting students for democracy is not enough unless we have a sense of the democracy in question. The more important issue is to explore what kind of society we want, so we must answer first what is the end of human beings. What must be avoided is an answer that really only means adapting students experimentally to a societal system.

2. The Interrelation of Aims

Eliot suggests that Joad's three aims for education—training for a profession, preparing for citizenship, and perfecting of one's capacities—are interrelated and thus may come into conflict. Being a good person may mean to refuse being a good citizen. Preparing to earn a living and pursuing studies for their own sake are two very different ends and approaches to education. For example, how does one train in terms of profession to be a good poet? Likewise, should not training for citizenship include the cultivation of moral judgment? Much that is required for good citizenship begins with lessons learned in the family, and citizenship is about more than political

knowledge. The development of a social conscience is not easy given the paradoxical and tragic state of the greatness and wickedness of human beings.

Questions for Consideration

- How important to Eliot's investigation in these first two lectures is the nature of the good human being?
- Is Eliot correct that citizenship is greater than political knowledge or social navigation?

3. The Conflict between Aims

Eliot argues that the trajectory of education towards universal education is fraught with the danger of state-overreach. First, the imposition of systems of education risks imposing something alien and destructive upon the ethos of a culture, such as the American adoption of the German research model or British colonialism in India, and Eliot thinks the global adoption of American models will lead to a global education too uniform and culturally placid. He also worries about a system in which state money and research money flows into large university education, each shaping what is taught for its financial and political ends. "Education for equal opportunity" raises the question of "opportunity for what?" And Eliot fears a state-run system that seeks to ultimately shape what people *should* desire. Of course, he admits that his writing on education has certain social ends in mind, too. All this highlights again the fundamental religious questions: what are human beings, and what is their end?

4. The Issue of Religion

In the battle between authoritarians and libertarians, Eliot thinks the authoritarians will win because regulation is so often a short-cut. Even those who claim they have only secular goals in mind are smuggling in religious ends, and in the current circumstances in England and America there is no satisfactory solution for everyone in which religion plays an institutional role in education, mainly because if one approach is better than another should it not be expanded to all? The Church must remain in tension with the State and be able to bring a critique against it. The nature of good citizenship should not be left to the government, and the nature of a good person is clarified by religion. In the end, all definitions of education and proposals for improving it are provisional and tied to persons arguing within local contexts and specific times. Eliot's own position is that education should seek to maintain continuity with the past, even as that past is reinterpreted for each generation. The end of wisdom is not reducible to utility.

Questions for Consideration

- Are Eliot's concerns about state-overreach to be taken seriously?
- Have his concerns with research monies controlling the nature of education been fulfilled?
- Is he wrong to reject all the various proposals for religious education that he reviews?
- Are all education proposals finally local and temporal, as Eliot argues?