

What is it to be educated?

It is to be a person who lives well; whose mind and heart attend to what is good and beautiful; who is able to delight in and care sensuously for the world; who brings thought and imagination to every activity; who faces life with an undeceived intelligence and with the desire to understand and to know.

At its very centre and core, education is about persons and personal development. I intend a precise meaning for the word 'person' here. I mean 'person as opposed to merely human being or individual'. Treating someone as a person means according dignity to his or her very existence, regardless of his or her usefulness or otherwise for achieving ends. We are not persons ourselves, nor do we treat others as persons, when this attitude is absent from our dealings. Education is not even about producing persons, for the relationship of producer and produced cannot, logically cannot, obtain between persons. The education of others can be undertaken only by persons.

In a sense, once it is said that the educated person is one 'whose heart and mind attend to what is good and beautiful', then everything has been said. For the person of moral and aesthetic sensibility will act and live well as a matter of course. Social concern, sympathy, understanding, fairness and right judgement will follow from character and from being a good person. This is why education must be concerned with personal development. It is why, too, the best teaching is done by example. For it is what a person is that shows others what they might become; not in the sense that if my teacher is an able mathematician, or craftsman, or ornithologist, then I too may become one, but that if my teacher works with dedication and concern, patience, perseverance and imagination, then I too see how to go about my activities. I do not imitate what is done; I acquire the admirable ways of doing anything.

There is a clear difference between education and training, although it is easier to distinguish between them in thought than in fact. In thought we can separate the idea of training human beings to function skilfully from the idea of initiating them into personhood. This is not to discredit training processes but to preserve the important distinction between them on the one hand as means to ends, and the essence of educational intention on the other as the recognition of intrinsic values. Most of us, for the most part, wish both to be trained in skills and to become persons and the two types of development can co-exist with ease. The tragic mistake is to think that in undergoing training we inevitably become persons: to suppose that to function skilfully is to possess intrinsic value. And this mistake is easily made because we have a world in which survival has come to depend almost wholly on acquired mutual and reciprocal skills. We have no doubts as to the importance of those skills and are clear, too, as to the best methods of transmitting and measuring them; so their acquisition has come to dominate us, whilst our vague and inarticulate desires to 'live well' have become submerged or are manifested only in feelings of dissatisfaction, disappointment and emptiness. Part of the trouble is that when we do try to speak about 'living well' we do not seem to be dealing with anything that is objectively measurable or which is achieved through precisely describable skills or methods. Because of this lack of scientific objectivity about the good life we tend to fall into two sorts of error in our attempts to encompass it.

The first sort of error is to think of the good life as a kind of superfluity or verbal gloss which, analysed, is seen simply as a way of describing the state of being of a well-equipped individual operating in a favourable environment. Thus, this error cashes out the good life in terms of skilful functioning. The second sort of error is more subtle, for it is a kind of pastiche or misinterpretation of what I shall argue is the real thing. This second error consists in attempting to cultivate for oneself an ostentatiously idiosyncratic personality by concentrating on self-expression, introspection, and the exploitation of feeling. In this error the good life is cashed out in terms of an over-riding and false individuality. Unhappily, the attempt tends to yield loneliness where independence is sought, sensitivity as a bewildering substitute for sensibility, and meaninglessness in the place of the desired enrichment of life.

These, I suggest, are the common errors we may commit in seeking a way to live well. The commission of the first error sells one out to being a functionary; the commission of the second to an empty individualism. But I believe that education, properly construed and engaged in, can save us from becoming merely functionaries on the one hand and from the false self of individualism on the other.

Education begins with an awareness of the remarkable fact of one's own existence in the world and among other existences. Its development depends on a contemplation of ideas and phenomena which widens and deepens consciousness gradually to form a personal realm, a 'life within life', which links the inner life with the outer world. Perhaps this description seems vague and uninformative: it says nothing about how its ideas are to be carried through into the details of daily life. More seriously, someone may object that there is no

difference between the approach it suggests and the one already described as erroneous in that its self-concern yields an empty individualism. There is, however, an important difference between the two approaches.

I described as erroneous the way of individualism that employs self-expression, introspection and an exploitation of feeling in its attempt at living well. This, of course, is not to say that those activities are intrinsically bad. The point is simply that we are mistaken if we deploy them as means to living well, that we are in error if we do so. I believe the approach fails to enable us to live well and that it results in loneliness and loss of meaning because it ignores, or does not take seriously, the well-known piece of perennial wisdom that tells us that we must first lose the self before we can find it. This is the key to the fundamental difference between individualism and personhood. I emphasise that these observations are not offered here as items of psychological sagacity but for the sake of making philosophical distinctions that will help us to reflect more clearly about the meaning and practice of education.

But now we are in a position to see the exact nature of the difference mentioned. The abandonment of the self that is required in order to find the self is signally achieved by what I shall call disinterested involvement. Such involvement may be with subjects studied, with pursuits, interests, with the sensuous care of the world. By disinterested involvement is meant not an involvement that requires a skill in order to achieve some end, nor an involvement which collects information with which to adorn one's individualism, but one which actually affects the mind and character solely because one has become totally absorbed in the contemplation of a problem or situation entirely independent of oneself. This is the loss of self that is required. Through disinterested involvement one imaginatively, laboriously, inhabits another segment of reality; the self is lost in total absorption in what is contemplated, and subsequently is found, bearing about it the authenticity of the original and personal experience it has undergone. Disinterested involvement is attention precisely of the sort that is the logical requirement for being a person, for treating others as persons and for becoming educated. It is an engagement of the heart and mind; not the acquisition of a portmanteau of cultural equipment to be carted around and judiciously opened for display when occasion seems to require it.

The difficulties of creating, discovering and receiving a true education are great, especially for those who, in 1984, are within a system of formal instruction at schools and colleges. If such people cannot think clearly about what is on offer they will be deeply confused by clashes between what they are urged to do and their own emerging purposes and life-values. There is the sense, which is not an illusion, of being processed through an instructional machine, and the knowledge that such a machine can be both useful and a conveyor-belt to disaster. There is the question whether, flamboyantly or stolidly, to reject the insult of being thus processed; the question whether to compromise over it; the question whether it is in fact, ultimately or totally, just a processing machine and nothing else. The dilemmas multiply in recognising the desperate need to acquire skills for survival in the world as given, and for changing the world; and in realising, too, that if there is some further splendour to be discovered in human life, now is the time to find in which direction it may lie.

Perhaps these problems may be understood, some even dissolved, if we can be clear as to what one is about, what one may or may not become committed to in any highly-organised instructional set-up. In acquiring a skill one is not necessarily selling oneself to a processing machine: for following a method and undergoing training are the logically appropriate ways of acquiring skills and, once acquired, a skill can be enjoyed in itself. Nor is someone who - and this must be obvious - becomes deeply engrossed in a non-examination subject or pursuit wasting time: here is the very activity of disinterested involvement into which education initiates us, and which can not only survive the business of being examined but can be generated by it. The acquisition of skills by training and the practice of disinterested involvement can and do co-exist and support each other.

What I have wanted to show is that some of the dilemmas that confront us can be dissolved if we think carefully about the nature of education and the various activities that shelter within its penumbra. It is important to be able to reflect in an illuminating way about what one might be committed to and what one might become.

It is supremely important to recognise that becoming educated is not just a matter of undergoing a process, but of engaging personally in a range of activities, and in each one for its own sake.