

## ANNUAL LECTURE 2009

### ‘EDUCATION AND THE GOOD LIFE’

#### *An enquiry into how education can provide for a flourishing state of the soul*

I should like to begin this evening’s lecture with the obvious: from the moment our children are born we love them completely and unconditionally. Above all else, we desire that they should be happy and free from harm. In order to secure their happiness we will labour; we will sacrifice. It is worth pausing momentarily to note the extraordinary commonality of these primal forces: every parent adores their child and seeks to provide for their happiness. Before nature and the world in which we live exert their influences upon the young child, we are graced with a clear vision: we see beauty; the very soul, the very person is completely beautiful. So powerful is this perception that it remains imprinted upon our hearts regardless of what time, nature and circumstance may bring.

In his consideration of what constitutes a ‘good’ life, Aristotle identifies the concept of the ‘good’ with happiness and gives it the name, ‘eudaimonia’. This Greek word is made of two parts, ‘eu’ meaning ‘good’ and ‘daimon’ which means a ‘spirit’. The word eudaimonia literally means ‘a good angel or spirit’, a flourishing state of the soul. It is this ‘flourishing spirit’, this ‘good angel’ which so fills the vision of every parent and which has the power to arouse limitless love. It follows naturally that it is the parent’s desire to protect that beauty from corruption or harm. The state of this being is naturally full of happiness; it is in a state of flourishing, just as it is.

As time passes, the child is subject to the various and ever-changing effects of nature and society. These influences, as well as education and family life, determine whether the soul continues to flourish or becomes stifled and diminished.

The parent’s essential desire for the child to enjoy well-being accords with Aristotle’s view that happiness is the aim of every human nature and that it is desirable for its own sake. This is where we must address an important point. As AC Grayling explains in his book *‘What is Good?’* Aristotle maintains that ‘happiness is in everyone’s ultimate interest because it is desirable for its own sake; all other goods are merely instrumental in helping to bring happiness about, whereas happiness is complete and self-sufficient.’ The point being made here is that real happiness is not a passing condition which arises as a result of contact with some external agent or instrument, be it material or otherwise.

Aristotle also maintains that because man’s defining mark or essence is essentially rational, he is capable of employing his power of reason to discover how to live ‘the good life’, which means a life of ‘practical wisdom’. He describes such a life as one lived ‘in accordance with virtue’. ‘Like Plato’, says AC Grayling, ‘Aristotle recognised people as having both rational and non-rational desires and saw virtue as being the condition in which reason governs the latter....The person who lives according to practical wisdom attains eudaimonia, and is accounted virtuous, where the virtues are such traits of character as courage, temperance, liberality, justice and honesty. Therefore, a person in whom these virtues are cultivated is said

by Aristotle to have the special virtue of magnanimity, the possession of a 'great soul'. Plato emphasises that to live well, to live nobly and richly in spirit is to have an ordered soul, one which is in harmony with itself.

In *The Republic* Plato searches for the nature of justice by examining the condition of the state and then that of the individual. The proposition is that justice or harmony is found when the constituent parts of the whole play their proper role. He says that the individual soul has three parts: reason, the emotions and the appetites. When these are in harmony, the individual is happy. Plato describes the achievement of internal harmony as 'the object of the intelligent man's life'. The condition in which there is agreement that reason should rule over the appetites is described as 'temperance' and a state of 'justice' is one in which the person's emotional force or 'will' supports the rule of reason. In Book 9 of *The Republic* Socrates describes this condition:

*"The only studies such a man values will be those that form his mind and character accordingly. As for his physical condition; he will not live merely with brutish and irrational pleasures in view, indeed he will not even make his bodily health his principal concern, for strength, health and beauty will mean nothing to him unless self-control accompanies them, and we shall always find him keeping his physical values in tune with his moral and intellectual values. He will observe the same principle of harmony in acquiring wealth, and will be careful not to become too rich, thereby accumulating problems; and he will think the same way about honours."*

Earlier in *The Republic* extensive consideration is given to the education of those who would attain this noble and happy state. This brings us to the vital point. If reason is to perform its role in measuring out the human appetites and achieving a state of internal harmony, it will need to have been nourished with wisdom and understanding. How is this achieved?

As we have just heard, the studies a person engages in will 'form his mind and character accordingly'. The content of our children's study should serve to enlighten and strengthen the intellect and emotions; it should introduce the person to the delights of a rich, noble and happy life. In essence, it should remind them of their birthright, eudaimonia, and encourage them to realise it ever more fully.

The curriculum should introduce our children to the nobility and beauty of life. It should be broad, expansive, and encourage depth of understanding. It should recognise that the quality of our experience of the world is governed by the content of our minds and hearts. Is the quality of our intellectual, emotional and spiritual knowledge rich or impoverished? Is knowledge delivered through inspired teachers who have glimpsed the glory of their subjects? Do our teachers see the essential beauty of the souls of their pupils?

In his incisive and rigorous manner, Chris Woodhead laments the 'desolation of learning' found in the National Curriculum. He says that 'knowledge has been marginalised to the point where ignorance is inevitable' due to an overwhelming emphasis on skills and processes. Learning how to learn is now all the rage. Professor Woodhead expands the point:

*“What...is meant when we are told children need ‘to know how to learn’? Human beings learn by listening to people who know more about the subject they are learning than they do themselves. They learn by reading and by exploring the limits of their understanding in writing.... Learning how to learn is, after all, not very exciting. What is exciting is learning. By which I mean having your eyes opened to the mystery and magic of a world which as a child you know nothing about. That is what good teachers do.”*

An additional trend is to undermine the subject disciplines themselves by ‘unifying areas of learning’. Professor Woodhead continues:

*“The whole point of subjects is that they enable us to make sense of the world in which we live. Indeed, our understanding of the world depends upon our mastery of the different ways in which over the centuries men have organised their experience of it: by which I mean science, mathematics, history, literature and other subjects of the school curriculum. ...Schools exist to teach knowledge that would not be encountered elsewhere.”*

Professor Woodhead maintains that the increasing time and emphasis given to so-called ‘whole person’ education such as SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning), Personal Wellbeing Programmes of Study, Financial Literacy and Citizenship should, instead, be covered by good family life, good parenting and a rich content being preserved in subject-teaching. Our quality of life, relationships and experience of the world are dependent upon the content of our education. This is how Professor Woodhead concludes:

*“Why do I think the mastery of different forms of knowledge important? First, because the world is not a given: the world we experience is the world we perceive, and our perceptions depend upon what we know....The more we know, the richer our lives....It is important, moreover, to note that the conversations of mankind involve forms of knowledge that have nothing to do with fact. Why should all children have the chance to experience great literature? Because, read attentively, poems and novels and plays quicken the pulse of our emotional life.”*

Here, I would underline the point that the subject content should, at best, introduce the pupil to the magnificence and potential of the human spirit.

A small example of an increasing trend to impoverish the content of the education available to our children is the vocabulary available to them. Words are the expression of concepts and it is through concepts that our experience of life and the world is made rich and given expression. This is obviously why it is essential that the literature presented to our children includes the best works of our literary heritage. To exemplify this, I quote from a recent article in the Telegraph highlighting the loss of certain key words from a recently updated Junior dictionary:

*“Oxford University Press has removed words like "aisle", "bishop", "chapel", "empire" and "monarch" from its Junior Dictionary and replaced them with words like "blog", "broadband" and "celebrity". Dozens of words related to the countryside have also been culled.*

*The publisher claims the changes have been made to reflect the fact that Britain is a modern, multicultural, multifaith society.*

*But academics and head teachers said that the changes to the 10,000 word Junior Dictionary could mean that children lose touch with Britain's heritage.*

*"We have a certain Christian narrative which has given meaning to us over the last 2,000 years. To say it is all relative and replaceable is questionable," said Professor Alan Smithers, the director of the centre for education and employment at Buckingham University. "The word selections are a very interesting reflection of the way childhood is going, moving away from our spiritual background and the natural world and towards the world that information technology creates for us."*

*An analysis of the word choices made by the dictionary lexicographers has revealed that entries from "abbey" to "willow" have been axed. Instead, words such as "MP3 player", "voicemail" and "attachment" have taken their place."*

There are two additional and crucial matters which need to be addressed here. The first is the tendency in education to emphasise the importance of enjoyment over and above the need for education itself. The so-called 'personalised curriculum' which the government is so keenly promulgating, hinges upon the notion that learning should be largely governed by the likes and dislikes of the individual. As Chris Woodhead so eloquently states: "*The personalised curriculum ...subordinates the mastery of what is difficult to the whim of the individual student.*" He then adds: "*Diligence and attention: how else are the forms of understanding upon which our humanity depends to be understood?*" Our children need to learn sticking power. It is necessary for them to accept that the good fruits of life are not always gained easily or indeed pleurably.

The second matter to address is the dangerous erosion of respect for authority at all levels of the social order. We have been steadily indoctrinated by a political pedagogy which encourages children to value their own opinions over the wisdom and authority of their forefathers, their parents, their teachers, their legal systems and their spiritual traditions. There is everything to recommend encouraging a spirit of enquiry but the excessive elevation of opinion which is so often based upon a vacuum of knowledge is a highly destructive trend. Humility is an essential virtue without which education and wholesome development cannot proceed.

At this year's annual Girls' Schools' Association conference Claire Fox, Director and Founder of the Institute of Ideas, spoke out very forcibly on this subject. She criticised our major institutions and leaders for deferring to the young for validation and credibility. She said that we are abandoning our culture and its time honoured standards by consulting the young in the formation of policy. In educational circles, there is a tendency to consult the young on everything from the employment of teachers to the content of the curriculum. Is it useful, she asked, to encourage confidence in opinion without any regard for content? She demonstrated her point by explaining how the government had recently changed the science curriculum because, after consultation with pupils, it emerged that they found it 'dull and

boring’: traditional scientific knowledge was replaced by a study of items such as the mobile phone. She warned that transmission of knowledge was being threatened by the elevation of opinion and that we were suffering from institutional ignorance. Children are setting the agenda: teachers are regarded as facilitators and pupils as equal partners in learning. We have lost confidence, she asserted, in our ability to transmit the best of our culture and knowledge.

It does seem extraordinary that a society which is deeply concerned about the happiness, education and well-being of its youth can be so confused as to the causes and remedies required. If we do not transmit the best of our culture, knowledge, wisdom and spiritual wealth to our young, how can they taste the riches of life?

Emotional well-being is derived partly from the high quality of our education as already described, and most significantly from the security of a stable family life. The findings of the recently published Children’s Society Report which received evidence from over 30,000 children, criticised our ‘me-first’ society whose parents have, it claimed, placed their own interests before their children’s welfare. It criticises us for “...excessive individualism. This is the widespread belief among adults that the prime duty of the individual is to make the most of their own life, rather than to contribute to the lives of others.” The result is the breakdown of families and communities. The report delivered some stinging findings, some of which I quote:

- *“FAMILY: Children with single or step parents are 50% more likely to suffer with lower academic achievement, poor self-esteem, unpopularity with other children, behavioural difficulties and depression.*
- *FRIENDS: The age at which people have their first sexual experience has dropped dramatically due to many forces including more privacy when both parents work and commercial pressures.*
- *VALUES: There needs to be a significant change at the heart of society, so that adults, be they parents or teachers, are less embarrassed to stand up for the values without which a society cannot flourish.”*

These findings speak for themselves and underline the pressing need for our young to be cherished by the stable love and attention of their parents, guided by principle, enriched with wisdom, inspired by example and protected by clear boundaries.

Aristotle states that ‘the person who lives according to practical wisdom attains eudaimonia, and is accounted virtuous, where his virtues are such traits of character as courage, temperance, liberality, justice and honesty’. This person, we will recall, was described as ‘magnanimous’, a great-soul. An important feature of the ‘good life’ in Aristotle’s view is that it should involve a concern for others. I would go even further and suggest that life cannot truly flourish unless at the centre of it there flows an ever expanding spirit of love: a genuine concern and engagement in the service of others.

This can begin with the guidance offered to our young people on the subject of friendship. For girls in particular, friendships are of central importance. The desire to be loved and to find a

special companion who will pour out their love on that person alone, thus becoming a ‘private possession’ is strong. The acquisitiveness of human nature can cause much heartache in this area of girls’ lives. Girls need to be taught that to receive love one has to learn to give it, not to demand. Love or friendship does not come to us by wanting it. A fundamental lesson for life is to give first and foremost; not to demand. Having received friendship or love, the protecting principle is to keep to the spirit of giving and not to become subject to the pangs of selfish desire which make a private claim on the other. This is a difficult but necessary lesson. They also have to be taught to avoid the tendency to cause division or enmity amongst ‘competitors’ for the friend which is so desired. Then there is the question of what it really means to be a friend to someone. Aristotle examines the nature of friendship deeply. He states that true friendship is not based merely on mutual usefulness or pleasure which, by definition, must pass but on that which is ‘grounded in good’. This means that one wishes for one’s friend what is truly best for him in the same way that one might wish the best for oneself. However, the emphasis here is on the fact that a true friend has within his or her vision the real person: they see that best and greatest part of him and wish to nourish and protect that alone. They would not act in a way which would diminish or damage the essential good of the person they call their friend. In this way, the friendship becomes truly conducive to the flourishing of the soul of each, and together, lifted by each others’ company, they blossom. Young people need to be introduced to this wisdom in the powerful search for true friendship.

Education therefore, must have at its very heart, the power to inspire our young people to respond to the needs of others, with the fullness of love, compassion, and mercy which is so natural to their young hearts. They must be introduced to the importance of commitment, self-sacrifice and devoted endeavour in service of their friends, families and communities. They should be inspired to consider that all their endeavours are preparing them for a time when they can offer their talents, multiplied through diligent endeavour, for the benefit of mankind.

Finally, to be truly inspired with vision and transformational energy, young people should be given the opportunity to taste the elixir of quietude within their own being – free from the burden of doing, knowing or becoming. Refreshed by the well-spring of life in meditative contemplation, they can rise up and play their parts with dignity, justice and beauty on the stage of the world.

In *The Apology* Socrates tells the Athenians that his primary concern is to seek wisdom. When education enriches the soul with wisdom, reason and love join forces to illumine the way for the enjoyment of a good life.

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