

Was Socrates an Educated Man, in Cardinal Newman's Sense?

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The question I want to consider today is the following: according to the notion of liberal education advanced by John Henry Newman in his work *The Idea of a University*, was Socrates¹ an educated man? Socrates is often recognized as the embodiment of an admirably critical and philosophical spirit; but is it also possible for us to see in him the marks of intellectual culture?

The answer to this question will, of course, depend on what Newman meant by the phrase

¹ I mean not only the Socrates of the Platonic dialogues, but also the evidence we find of him in other authoritative sources: Aristotle and Xenophon, for example. See note 16 below.

“liberal education.” Hence I will first examine the meaning he ascribes to it in *The Idea of a University*, and then proceed to determine the extent to which Socrates fits into Newman’s paradigm. I shall point out two essential ways in which Socrates conforms to Newman’s doctrine and two ways in which he does not.

What, then, does Newman mean by “liberal education?” First, the “liberal,” which is most properly opposed to the “useful,” designates what is pursued for its own sake. An activity or endeavor is to be considered liberal when no result is expected from the activity beyond the activity itself.² Second, “education” refers to that process by which the intellect is refined, perfected, and developed in its capacities. To adapt a parallel to which Newman himself makes frequent appeal,³ education is to the intellect as exercise and proper dietary habits are to the body. Just as physical activity and healthy eating develop and perfect the body, so does intellectual activity develop, perfect, and, to use Newman’s terminology, “cultivate” the mind. Education tends towards the perfection or excellence of the intellect as its goal.⁴

Such being the meaning of “liberal” and “education” taken separately, we can see that the complete phrase “liberal education” refers to the perfecting or cultivation of the intellect for its own sake. Newman states:

² John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University, Defined and Illustrated*, ed. Charles Frederick Harrold (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1947), pp.95-6 (Discourse V, 4): “...that alone is liberal knowledge, which stands on its own pretensions, which is independent of sequel, expects no complement, refuses to be *informed* (as it is called) by any end, or absorbed into any art, in order duly to present itself to our contemplation.”

³ Namely, the parity of bodily health and intellectual health: cf., e.g., *Ibid.* pp.145-7 (Discourse VII, 6). Both physical and intellectual health are good in themselves, apart from any result; and yet they both provide many benefits that would not be possible without them, though they are not beneficial for something specific.

⁴ Cf. *Ibid.* p.123 (Discourse VI, 6).

Surely it is very intelligible to say, and that is what I say here, that Liberal Education, viewed in itself, is simply the cultivation of the intellect, as such, and its object is nothing more or less than intellectual excellence.⁵

But in what precisely does such intellectual excellence consist? To begin with, it does not consist in the mere accumulation of facts or acquiring of knowledge.⁶ A memory stored with many facts and details may be a necessary condition of intellectual culture, but by itself it is not sufficient. Intellectual excellence is not a mere passive acceptance of ideas;⁷ for, as Newman contends, the heart of education is the student's active participation in the grasping of knowledge in all its relations and implications, which requires him to engage the material, fitting arguments into place and reconciling new concepts with what he already knows. The one being educated must learn to assimilate ideas, compare positions, draw conclusions, and estimate the value of information for himself, just as the healthy man must do his own exercise. In Newman's words, the content of knowledge "must not be admitted into the mind passively, as so much acquirement, but must be mastered and appropriated as a system consisting of parts, related one to the other, and interpretative of one another in the unity of a whole."⁸ Finally, one should take note that this systematic, integrated quality of the educated man's knowledge requires that he see each intellectual discipline in its proper place. Though he does

⁵ Ibid. p.107 (Discourse V, 9). Cf. p.101 (Discourse V, 6): "cultivation of mind is surely worth seeking for its own sake;" and p.101 (Discourse V, 7): "I am prepared to maintain that there is a knowledge worth possessing for what it is, and not merely for what it does..."

⁶ Cf. Ibid. pp.113-5 (Discourse VI, 3).

⁷ Cf. Ibid. p.130 (Discourse VI, 9): "knowledge is something more than a sort of passive reception of scraps and details..."

⁸ Ibid. p.159 (Discourse VIII, 1). Cf. pp.361-2 ("Discipline of Mind"): "A man may hear a thousand lectures, and read a thousand volumes, and be at the end of the process very much wiser he was, as regards knowledge. Something more than merely *admitting* it in a negative way into the mind is necessary, if it is to remain there. It must not be passively received, but actually and actively entered into, embraced, mastered. The mind must go half-way to meet what comes to it from without."

specialize in his chosen field of study,⁹ he acknowledges the legitimacy of other pursuits, respects the boundaries of every science, recognizes that each is but a partial view of the whole of reality, and knows which questions should be referred to experts of other fields. He possesses “the comprehension of the bearings of one science on another, and the use of each to each, and the location and limitation and adjustment and due appreciation of them all, one with another.”¹⁰ Such is the effect and goal of a liberal education.

Now we may ask: How does Socrates fair under this notion of liberal education? We can at once recognize an essential attribute of education in him insofar as he appreciated the importance of being an active participant in the grasping of knowledge. Socrates made it his whole life’s work to draw others into a dialogue in order to actively examine the consistency of their position on a wide variety of subjects. His mind was no passive receptacle of ideas; for he gave no argument his assent, nor any claim his unguarded belief, without having first submitted it to his critical judgment. Through a natural genius refined by long training, he was able to see quickly the consequences of positions, and remained dissatisfied with all inconsistencies. He believed, as did Newman, that human knowledge is one and unified, not fragmented and incoherent.¹¹ In terms of his attitude toward knowledge, Socrates is a remarkable example of what education should entail.

⁹ Cf. Ibid. p.90 (Discourse V, 1) and pp.126-128 (Discourse VI, 8): in fact, “a smattering in a dozen branches of study” is “shallowness,” not enlargement. The attempt to learn a few, or even one, science well is more conducive to education than a superficial acquaintance with many.

¹⁰ Ibid. p.46 (Discourse III, 4).

¹¹ Cf., e.g., Ibid. pp.40-3 (Discourse III, 2) and p.45 (Discourse III, 4): “Summing up, gentlemen, what I have said, I lay it down that all knowledge forms one whole, because its subject-matter is one; for the universe in its length and breadth is so intimately knit together, that we cannot separate off portion from portion, and operation from operation, except by a mental abstraction...”

We may also notice, as a second point of agreement, that Socrates, as we know him from Plato's dialogues, would have been a model participant in Newman's university. For, as Newman argues, the essentials of a university could remain even if there were no teachers or degree-examinations—depending, of course, upon the quality of the students:

When a multitude of young men, keen, open-hearted, sympathetic, and observant, as young men are, come together and freely mix with each other, they are sure to learn from one another, even if there be no one to teach them; the conversation of all is a series of lectures to each, and they gain for themselves new ideas and views, fresh matter of thought, and distinct principles for judging and acting, day by day.¹²

Such a sketch is an apt description of Socrates' own life, in particular his customary daily association with the young men of Athens for the purpose of discussing philosophical issues. He always insisted that, unlike the Sophists, he had "never been anyone's teacher."¹³ And yet he gradually attracted a group of youth who became his constant companions in philosophical conversation, creating for them an atmosphere highly conducive, and in fact dedicated, to the refinement of the intellect. As he declared in the *Apology*, "I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living for men."¹⁴ And the Socratic examined life entails, above all, the cultivation of the intellect.

Nevertheless, Socrates departed from Newman's paradigm in at least two significant ways. First, he did not maintain a "due appreciation" for certain intellectual disciplines other than his own—specifically, the pursuits of natural science. Severely disappointed by the failure

¹² Ibid. p.129 (Discourse VI, 9).

¹³ Plato, *Apology* in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper and trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), p.30 (33a-b).

¹⁴ Ibid., p.33 (38a).

of the physicists, in his estimation, to make sense of the world through material explanations, he decided to abandon his own study of natural science.¹⁵ He seems to have thought that natural science was incapable of delivering on its promise of adequately explaining the physical world and of yielding authentic knowledge as every worthwhile study does. Thus the grounds of his decision violates Newman's principle of comprehensiveness in education, which would require the educated man to see each partial view of reality, that is each intellectual discipline, in its proper place. In order to comply with Newman's idea, Socrates would have had to allow natural science its proper place in a unified study of things, instead of being leery of its methods and skeptical of its ability to achieve knowledge. In this respect he did not entirely possess the attributes of a liberal education.

Secondly, Socrates departs from Newman significantly when he identifies virtue with a certain kind of knowledge. Whereas the unity of virtue and knowledge is a fundamental Socratic teaching,¹⁶ Newman adamantly denies that any refinement of the intellect as such contributes toward the acquisition of moral virtue.¹⁷ The Socratic doctrine that virtue is some form of knowledge would explain why Socrates thought it was "the greatest good for a man to

¹⁵ As explained in the *Phaedo*, 97b-100b.

¹⁶ We know this even from sources external to Plato's dialogues; cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* in *Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon and trans. W.D. Ross (New York: Modern Library, 2001), p.1036 (1144^b27-30): "Socrates, then, thought the virtues were rules or rational principles (for he thought they were, all of them, forms of scientific knowledge), while we think they *involve* a rational principle." See also p.977 (1116^b4-6): "Experience with regard to particular facts is also thought to be courage; this is indeed the reason why Socrates thought courage was knowledge;" p.1035 (1144^b17-20): "Socrates in one respect was on the right track while in another he went astray; in thinking that all the virtues were forms of practical wisdom he was wrong;" and p.1038 (1145^b25-7): "For *Socrates* was entirely opposed to the view in question, holding that there is no such thing as incontinence; no one, he said, when he judges acts against what he judges best—people act so only by reason of ignorance."

But for evidence internal to the dialogues, see the *Meno* in *Complete Works*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, p.888 (89a). At the conclusion of the argument, Socrates sums up his argument as follows: "Then we say that virtue is wisdom, either the whole or a part of it?" and, of course, Meno agrees. The passage in 86a-b also implies a connection between knowledge and moral improvement. Cf. also *Protagoras*, p.782 (352b-c) and *Apology*, p.24 (25d-26a).

¹⁷ Cf., e.g., Newman, *The Idea of a University*, pp.106-8 (Discourse V, 9).

discuss virtue every day;" for if virtue is a certain kind of knowledge, then it would seem that one could obtain virtue and goodness through philosophical discussion. Now insofar as moral improvement was Socrates' motivation for seeking knowledge, his ideal of the examined life is not wholly consistent with Newman's vision of education as the cultivation of the intellect entirely for its own sake.¹⁸ For to cultivate the intellect for the sake of virtue is to cultivate it for something else and not for itself.

Of the works discussed here today, Newman's *Idea of a University* most directly describes institutions of education in terms which a modern audience would recognize. And we have seen how, in the case of Socrates, major aspects of his life and thought conform to Newman's model quite remarkably: in particular, his habitual method of critically examining ideas, his attempt to integrate his knowledge into a consistent whole, and his creation of a community of companions grounded in intellectual discussion. This remains true, despite his hesitancy about natural science and his stance on the unity of virtue and knowledge. Although these two positions are indeed irreconcilable with Newman, the latter at least puts him in contact with Hugh of St. Victor and medieval Christian education in general. Differences with Newman notwithstanding, the Socratic achievement, considered precisely as an achievement in education, is still of the highest cultural importance. At his trial, Socrates was formally charged with "corrupting the young"¹⁹ of Athens because he was indeed at the center of a real and potent change in their intellectual lives. He may not have possessed every mark of the liberally educated man, but he was educated enough to have caused, through those who came under

¹⁸ Ibid., p.107 (Discourse V, 9). Cf. p.101 (Discourse V, 6): "cultivation of mind is surely worth seeking for its own sake;" and p.101 (Discourse V, 7): "I am prepared to maintain that there is a knowledge worth possessing for what it is, and not merely for what it does..."

¹⁹ Cf. *Apology*, p.23 (24b-c).

his influence, a revolution in philosophy, and to have impressed an irrevocable mark on the character of all Western thought, trailing in the wake of his “second voyage.”²⁰

²⁰ Cf. *Phaedo*, 99d.