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Three Minds: Liberal Education According to William Harry Jellema¹

Today we honor the memory of Professor Harry Jellema for the lively interest in general education he created among us. This is not to imply that we have followed his counsels. We have revised our general education program several times during our short twenty-five year history. Indeed, we revised the original “Foundation-Distribution” program even before our first class graduated in 1967. None of these revisions reflect the deeper substance of Professor Jellema’s concerns. But then neither did Calvin College follow his vision, as I shall later explain. Nevertheless, both Calvin College and Grand Valley, each in its own way, would have been much the poorer without the influence of his presence and ideas at crucial times in their history.

One of Professor Jellema’s main warnings was that we should not confuse general education with liberal education. On general education, he made two points. First, he supported the idea of general education in so far as it represents a healthy protest against the specialization and fragmentation of the modern university curriculum. It correctly detects the foolishness of the assumption that “the wise man is a specialist, the wise student is he who specializes as early as possible in the field of his interest.” It judges correctly that

. . . graduates of such a curriculum come out ignorant of the pattern of Western culture, unread, hopelessly provincial; fit at best for a narrow vocation in a competitive society; unfit for citizenship in a republic, to say nothing of unfitness for discharging responsibilities with reference to moral issues. (Jellema 19)

Second, however, Professor Jellema judged that, as a remedy for this state of affairs, any effort at general education would likely prove inadequate, in spite of its well-meant effort to “ensure that no student graduate without cross-sectional acquaintance with all fields of knowledge” (20). His reasoning for this exposes two assumptions which are deeply entrenched in the modern university: The first assumption concerns the nature of knowledge itself:

Too frequently the advocate of general education himself still believes that knowledge is simply a collection of specialties; that there is no real knowledge except as it is highly specialized. . . And if this is his approach, . . . the graduate

of his curriculum may not be much better off than the kind of graduate he is lamenting (21).

The second assumption concerns the way in which knowledge is to be divided and specialized. The advocate of general education is apt to assume “that the body of knowledge with which the student is cross-sectionally to make acquaintance is that content which the modern mind thinks, and as it is thought by the modern mind” (21). In other words, the advocate of general education is not likely to have examined, and grappled with, the deepest assumptions of the modern culture which has produced the problem of fragmentation he protests.

What, then, does liberal education do that general education fails to do? The answer is, in Jellema’s words:

Liberal education aims at the man in each individual; at the man, intellectual and moral, . . . and at the intellectual for the sake of the moral. . . How shall we think the concept man? Can man be defined simply by reference to nature? or simply by reference to nature and himself? . . . What ought man to be? Is there an objective purpose set for him? And where shall we go for answers to all such questions? (16)

Professor Jellema’s response to such questions, so far as they express his definition of the central aim of liberal education, can be elaborated in the following ten theses, which I have drawn from his pamphlet:

1. “Far more important than *what* the individual happens to think about this or that is the *mind with which* he thinks” (24). In other words, it is the mind that makes the man, the person, the human being that each one of us aspires (or should aspire!) to be. In this language readers will recognize, as indeed did the framers of the contemporary Calvin College curriculum, the “classicist view” of liberal education (CLAE 44-47). On this view, the central question which every one devoted to liberal education must face, regardless of his specialty, though also in the light of it, is the question, what is it to be fully human? Anything less will be less than what a liberal education should be.

2. If it is the mind that makes the human being, what is it that makes the mind? The answer to this question yields the second thesis: The mind with which I think is molded by, shaped by one or another of just a very few fundamental intellectual patterns which have emerged in the history of Western civilization. What shapes our minds is, among other things, education itself; not *liberal* education but education as it is influenced by the prevailing culture in which it occurs. For us, of course, that is a culture which embodies what Jellema calls “the modern mind.” Whether we are conscious of it or not, we are inevitably shaped by the prevailing intellectual assump-

tions of the culture around us — unless, that is, a *liberal* education has put us on our guard, made us aware of these assumptions, and challenged us to examine and criticize them to see whether they indeed allow us to be fully human in our living or not. *Liberal* education, in a word, is, for Jellema, a fundamentally critical education; anything less is not a liberal education, but an illiberal, provincial, unenlightened reinforcement of prejudice — a pre-judging of the nature of human beings in the absence of a thorough examination of such nature from as many fundamental points of view as possible.

3. These fundamental points of view are, finally, very few. There are, according to Jellema, only three basic, differing conceptions of the nature of human beings which have emerged in the West, and each in turn offers a distinctive “intellectual pattern” for molding their minds. These three “minds,” as he calls them, are the classical Greek and Roman mind; the Biblical, Judaeo-Christian mind; and the modern, secular, scientific mind.

The pagan, classical mind affirms the objective existence of goodness, of a moral order in the universe, and it affirms the ability of human reason to discover and know this order and to be led and governed by it. This classical mind took critical account of, and rejected ancient materialism, its competitor and the forerunner of the modern scientific mind. This mind was also the original architect of liberal education, for in the persons of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, it represents the original effort in the West to ask the question, What is the human? and to answer the question by a critical examination of the only other view which competed for attention in the ancient world, namely the materialism of Democritus and the atomists. The humanism of Plato and Aristotle won out, but only in light of its explicit evaluation and rejection of materialist views; and this humanism shaped the culture of Hellenistic and Roman civilization for at least a thousand years. It is no wonder, therefore, that Professor Jellema’s definition of liberal education has been called the “classicist view.” It is also the original view of what a liberal education is.

The second “mind” for Jellema is the Biblical, Judaeo-Christian mind. This mind affirms the objectivity of goodness and the moral order of the universe of the classical mind, but affirms in addition the existence of God, who has revealed himself as an eternal, perfect, personal being, and as the creator, sustainer, and ruler of the universe; and it also affirms the inability of human reason, unaided by revelation, to know God properly. This Biblical mind, in the early centuries of our era, and down through the Middle Ages, took sympathetic but critical account of the classical mind, and created the medieval synthesis often referred to as Christian humanism. As modi-

fied by the Reformation, this Christian humanism was Jellema's ideal for Calvin College as a *Christian* liberal arts institution.

The third "mind" for Jellema is the modern, scientific mind. This mind affirms the exclusive objective existence of nature, that is, of the physical, material reality of the sensible world around us. Note carefully that this is not science itself, but a "mind." With natural and social science as such, Jellema had no quarrel; only with its dominance of the curriculum, and with the assumption behind this dominance that the scientific approach to knowledge is the only or the most important approach to knowledge there is. As a "mind," the modern mind either consciously affirms or unconsciously assumes a claim *about* science; viz., that its empiricism is the *only* source of truth about human nature, the world, and the universe. As such, this mind is at best indifferent to, at worst hostile to the other two minds, and to their respective claims that we can know, either by reason or by revelation or by both, the objective moral order of the universe and the existence of God. This mind, as I indicated earlier, Professor Jellema saw as the mind whose assumptions govern the modern college and university. Indeed, he claimed that the curriculum of Calvin College had been shaped more by this modern mind than by the Christian humanism which that college might have been expected to embrace (5-13).

4. These three minds — so goes the fourth thesis in my exposition of Jellema's definition of a liberal education — are culturally embodied in the great works of literature, philosophy, art and architecture of classical, medieval, and modern civilization. This thesis is obvious enough, perhaps, although, as Professor Jellema often pointed out, it is not meant to suggest that the classical and medieval (or Judaeo-Christian) minds are out of date. This is precisely what the modern mind believes, of course, since it is the prevalent mind today. Even though the classical and Christian minds are on the defensive in modern culture, their legacies persist into our age, and provide live options for us, even though we have been predominantly influenced by modernity. Or, at least, those options as live options are what a liberal education should make possible for us. This brings me to theses 5 and 6.

5. Our minds, and the minds of our students, are shaped predominantly by the modern mind of scientific secularism, unless, as is increasingly rare, we have been nurtured in the Christian church or the Jewish synagogue, or still more rarely, by a deeply classical education.

6. The central thing that a liberal education can do for us is to challenge the provincialism of whatever mind happens to have shaped us. For most of us, of course, this will be the modern mind, the mind with which we who live in this modern age are

most inclined to think, no matter what the subject is we choose to think about. Relatively few of us, as we have just noted, were molded either by the Christian or Jewish tradition or by a classical education. Any education which fails to compel our critical examination of all three minds, and thereby our own individual mind, regardless of which one has shaped us, is thereby illiberal. This could be true of the Christian education of a college like Calvin no less than of the secular education of a college like Grand Valley: of the former, if the Christianity it embodies is provincial, insular, and irrelevant; of the latter, if the modernity it embraces remains provincial, uncritical, and prejudiced. It is no wonder that Professor Jellema had his critics at Calvin as well as at Grand Valley: he was the penetrating exposé no less of an uncritical, dogmatic Christianity than of an uncritical, dogmatic adherence to the assumptions of modernity. This brings me to theses 7 and 8.

7. The best way to conduct this challenge to the provincial, closed mind is to introduce into the curriculum a conspicuous and unavoidable component made up of that mind which is most remote from the mind most likely to have shaped the student's thinking. The mind most likely to have shaped our minds is, of course, the modern mind, or the modern mind in some combination with the Christian mind. For Jellema, therefore, this meant introducing, as much as possible, the classical texts of Greek culture.

Any one of these will do — Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Thucydides, Plato, Aristotle, but the more, the better. As his favorite text to do the job, Professor Jellema chose Plato's *The Republic*. *The Republic* is, of course, a book in philosophy, Professor Jellema's own professional specialty. But it is also the first great text in economics, political theory, psychology, educational theory, sociology, aesthetics, and theology; indeed, it deals significantly with every major question ever asked by a human being. It is also a dramatic dialogue, directly engaging us in the testing of ideas on all these matters. Moreover, it introduces us to Socrates, the greatest questioner, perhaps, of all time, who embodies the central aim of a liberal education defined as discovering "man, intellectual and moral." *The Republic* is, furthermore, the mature work of a great thinker who understood his own age, and the deep conflicts within it: conflicts between freedom and authority, religion and science, the state and the individual, moral relativism and moral absolutes — conflicts which are universally human, and which, for that reason, continue to characterize or underlie many of the public controversies which compel our attention still today. All of these features of *The Republic* are, however, only splendid extras besides what it does best: embody the Greek vision of a universe in which goodness and justice are rationally attainable and constitute what human

life is ultimately all about.

8. How can these texts of classical civilization do for us what needs to be done, in order for us to be liberally educated human beings? By enabling us, if they are properly taught, to “get inside,” to use Jellema’s famous phrase, a mind other than our own: “From the inside”; I know not how else briefly to suggest that the familiarity with each of the three...minds should be more than what the individual customarily obtains from a contemporary textbook in History,” which is usually written with the uncriticized assumption that “historiography is only a kind of sociological description and tracing of ‘causes’ by a spectator convinced of the infinite superiority of modern mind” (24f). Continuing in this vein, Jellema says:

My concern is not to minimize facts and natural and social causes . . . , but only to emphasize that this is not yet liberal education. The student must learn to think, and to choose, and define God and man, and right and wrong, and reality and appearance, and state and society, and justice and mercy, and the ends of science and business, and all the rest, when one *thinks and believes* with the mind of e.g. pre-Christian culture . . . He is to become familiar with it in all its articulate concreteness as a mind by which men did, and can do, and do, their thinking and living and choosing and believing and hoping. . . (25)

By contrast with reading a typical modern textbook in history, the proper study of an original, primary text (regardless of which mind it embodies), can liberally educate us by teaching us how to read a book; by which is meant reading it not merely to acquire the facts it presents but also, and especially, to evaluate the assumptions it makes, the mind it expresses, and the dialogue it conducts, if any, with the other minds (in Jellema’s sense). Answering a stock objection, Jellema replies:

Classical education has often been ridiculed as being an education in books instead of realities, in words instead of in facts. . . Certainly one who uncritically assumes that the only objective system is the system manifested in the facts of nature, the system which involves matter, space, time, and perhaps a divine geometer or originator, is, irrespective of his field of specialization, whether physics or biology or history, unable to understand the meaning of a book. Education in books is not what he supposes it to be; and ability to read a book is not what he means by ability to read.

The reflective activity which is expressed in books is the medium in which the trans-natural disciplinary system objectively manifests itself. The student is to have his mind patterned by this system, by these objective laws, surely no less than by the objective system found in the world of natural fact. (27)

In short, Jellema concludes:

No student is liberally educated who is not familiar from the inside with the

Pagan (or Pre-Christian, or Classical, or “Ancient”) mind, both on its idealistic and its materialistic side; with the Christian as represented by, e.g., the Middle Ages and the Reformation; . . . and with the Renaissance-Aufklärung-19th Century-Contemporary mind Hence general education is not enough. (25)

9. Actually, this “inside familiarity” with the three minds is still insufficient; liberal education aims also to make us critically conscious of our own personal ultimate assumptions about the natural world, human life, and the universe. For such critical self-consciousness, “inside familiarity” with the three minds is necessary, of course, but it is not enough. We must come, ultimately, in the words of the Apollonian oracle, to know ourselves. It is no wonder that an early edition of the *Grand Valley College Catalog* contained, at the beginning of the description of its academic program, the following quotation from John Henry Cardinal Newman:

It is a liberal education which gives a man a clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them. It prepares him to fill any post with credit, and to master any subject with facility. (VII, 10)

10. But even such critical self-consciousness is not enough; we must also, and finally, each of us personally, *evaluate* the mind by which, as we discover, we have been prevailingly shaped; and of course, we must conduct this self-evaluation in the light of the two minds which are the major alternatives to our own. Which mind I personally come to think with, in a way that is critically conscious of itself — the classical, the Judaeo-Christian, or the modern scientific — involves something more, however, than the self-examination which a liberal education makes possible. At last, or perhaps even to begin with, the shaping of my mind, and the shaping of the mind of every human being, is, according to Professor Jellema, the result of a *commitment to be shaped* by (mainly) one of these three minds, a commitment which is “ultimately religious in character” (25).

With these ten theses I have tried to set forth Professor Jellema’s definition of a liberal education. I will conclude with two points: a comment on the validity of his definition and an explanation of what I believe Jellema meant here by “religious.”

As I see it, no one among his former colleagues at Calvin College or at Grand Valley has yet shown convincingly that his definition is not one of the most desirable definitions of liberal education available to the modern college. At Grand Valley none of us, either individually or with others in study committees, has argued carefully and for public scrutiny that the various revisions of our own general education program were improvements on the ideas Professor Jellema sowed among us; some of

us think instead that these revisions, on the whole, have brought more confusion into our curriculum rather than less.

Professor Jellema wrote his pamphlet in 1958, a time when Calvin College was beginning to examine its curriculum. Calvin had followed essentially the same curriculum since 1920, when it adopted the curriculum at the University of Michigan as a model. The reconstruction of Calvin's curriculum finally occurred in 1965. The Committee which proposed it counted Dr. Jellema's monograph among the "significant and stimulating antecedents" of its own proposal (CLAE "Introduction"). Still, that Committee did not adopt his vision as its primary focus. Instead, it criticized the "classicist view" (as it identified Jellema's approach) for its passivity, asserting that its "emphasis is all on understanding and judging culture, not on contributing to it" (CLAE 46). But "understanding and judging culture" are among the most active functions of a human being, and engaging in them responsibly, among the most difficult — reason enough for giving them a central place; while the charge that the classicist view does not emphasize "contributing to culture" simply begs the question of what our culture most needs from its liberal arts colleges. The *Report* advances as "the primary focus" of its own proposal that this need is "to *develop* the various disciplines; and, as a corollary,...[to] educate new generations for productive and creative work in the various disciplines" (24f). But this goal introduces at the undergraduate level what arguably should be the province of the graduate level of a university and, in any event, it fans the fire of the very specialization and fragmentation which both general and liberal education seek to contain.

The *Report* continues its criticism of the "classicist view" by worrying that, under its leading, the sciences will not receive their just due. As we have seen, however, it was not Jellema's aim to deny the sciences their rightful place; moreover, the *Report* itself observes that reducing the sciences to a minor role "does not seem...to be an essential part of the [classicist] view" (45). Finally, the *Report* argues that relevance to the modern world requires precisely the kind of "concentration" that the specialization of the modern curriculum supports. It explicitly denies "that we can any longer look for men who are wise on all matters," for "the development of a wise and cultured man" which it was the traditional aim of a liberal education to produce. "We can only look for a wise community," says the *Report*, which is, presumably, a community made up of people who are competent only in their specialized fields. How such a community will be wise in the absence of human beings who are wise as human beings, not as narrow specialists, the *Report* does not go on to explain, except for expressing the deep conviction that the Christian faith will "provide us with a

framework and a structure for our thought” (57). The *Report* thus expects a shared religion to be the integrating feature of the curriculum. But how that religion organizes and unifies the curriculum is not obvious; nor is it obvious how religion, through a combination of general education and specialization in the disciplines, produces wise people who are anything other than competent in their chosen discipline and more or less informed in some others.

Finally, what did Professor Jellema have in mind when he said that the commitment we make to the mind which will pattern us is “ultimately religious in character”? He did not mean, I think, what is ordinarily meant by “religious,” i.e. embracing one particular religion or another. He meant instead something at once more general and more profound, viz., that we can not, in the long run, decide for ourselves between these three main minds from some rationally neutral standpoint. All the liberal education in the world will not, that is, make us classical Greek humanists, Christian humanists, or scientific-secular humanists. The mind we finally possess is not a matter of liberal education (still less of indoctrination) so much as of conversion; hence the term “religious.” “Conversion” is the word Plato also uses to describe what could happen to people who (gradually or suddenly) see that they have been living in a cave all their lives, and that the truly real world is outside the cave, and is quite different from (and far more splendid than) what they previously believed (518 c).

Professor Jellema’s own commitment was to the mind of Christian humanism. It was evident to his students and colleagues alike that they were in the presence of a humble, fascinating Christian person: humble, because he made no pretence to indoctrinating, let alone converting us; fascinating, because he embodied so graciously the ideal of the liberally educated human being. In an age when there are few people left who aspire to this ideal, and even fewer colleges that dedicate themselves any more to the single-minded pursuit of it, the memory of Harry Jellema is an inspiration.

End Notes

¹This essay is a version of my remarks at a symposium sponsored by Grand Valley State College on February 13, 1987, to honor the memory of W. Harry Jellema. Professor Jellema was one of the founding fathers of Grand Valley State College. Having just retired from Calvin College in 1962, he went on, for more than a decade, to teach philosophy, chair the department, and lead the Social Studies Division in the new institution.

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