or immoral popularly supported policies can be. And the responsibility for such failures must ultimately be borne by the members of a democracy themselves. No matter how angrily they may denounce their political leaders, the people originally chose them and can by the very same process replace them. Every elected official is aware that in order to retain his position he must be sensitive to the desires of his constituents; if he is out of touch with their wishes, he will soon be forced to seek other employment.

But this power of the people presents democracy with its most crucial problem, for what defense is there against a narrow-minded or gullible citizenry? If the public cannot distinguish reason from demagoguery, integrity from duplicity, wisdom from folly, then all is lost. For not only is an open society susceptible to a misguided majority, but by its very nature it offers avenues to power for potential tyrants who, having availed themselves of freedom, would at the first opportunity deny it to others.

So the crucial question is: how can the members of a democracy be provided with the necessary understanding and capability to reap the greatest possible benefits from the democratic process while at the same time protecting that process from those who would seek its destruction? The answer is to be found in the enterprise of education.

Now it becomes clear why in a democracy every individual's education should be of such vital concern. For the ignorance of some is a threat to all. If a person should complain that his democracy is providing too much education for too many people, he thereby reveals his misunderstanding of the nature of a democratic society. How can the electorate be too educated, how can they know too much, how can they be too astute? Too little education, however, and there may soon be no democracy.

Chapter 2

The Content of a Liberal Education

Having recognized the need for education within a democracy, we need to determine the appropriate content of that education. In addition to an understanding and appreciation of the democratic system itself, what knowledge, skills, and values are necessary to enable individuals to live intelligently and responsibly as free persons in a free society?

We may begin by noting the obvious fact that all members of a democracy should be able to read, write, and speak effectively. An individual who is unable to understand others or make himself understood is both hindered in his personal growth and unable to participate fully in the free exchange of opinions so vital to the democratic process. A command of language is indispensable in the marketplace of ideas,
and hence it is of vital importance for members of a democracy to acquire linguistic facility.

Also essential is an understanding of public issues. How can a citizen sensibly enter into discussion of matters he does not understand? How can he reasonably evaluate the judgment of his representatives if he is unable to comprehend the complexities of the questions they are deciding? In a democracy public issues cover an enormous range of topics, for every action of a government is an appropriate subject for open discussion, and such actions typically involve social, political, economic, scientific, and historical factors. Consider some of the critical issues confronting the world today: poverty, overpopulation, pollution, ideological conflict, the dangers of nuclear warfare, and the possible benefits of space research. How can these matters be intelligently discussed or even understood by those ignorant of the physical structure of the world, the forces that shape society, or the ideas and events that form the background of present crises? Thus substantial knowledge of natural science, social science, world history, and national history is required for all those called upon to think about public issues, and in a democracy such participation is required of everyone. Granted, elected representatives must carry the major burden of formulating and implementing governmental policies. Still, each citizen has both the right and the duty to evaluate and try to influence the decisions of his government.

The study of science requires familiarity with the fundamental concepts and techniques of mathematics, since such notions play a critical role in the natural sciences and an ever increasing role in the social sciences. Furthermore, apart from its use in other inquiries, mathematics is itself an invaluable aid in the handling of everyday affairs, for, as Alfred North Whitehead noted: “Through and through the world is infected with quantity. To talk sense, is to talk in quantities. It is no use saying the nation is large,—How large? It is no use saying that radium is scarce,—How scarce? You cannot evade quantity.”

But to know the results of scientific and historical investigations is not sufficient; one must also understand the methods of inquiry that have produced those results. No amount of knowledge brings intellectual sophistication, unless one also possesses the power of critical thinking. To think critically is to think in accord with the canons of logic and scientific method, and such thinking provides needed protection against the lure of simplistic dogmas that appear attractive, yet threaten to cut the lifeline of reason and stifle the intellect. A member of a democracy who cannot spot a fallacious argument or recognize relevant evidence for a hypothesis is defenseless against those who would twist facts to suit their own purpose.

Still another characteristic should be possessed by all members of a democracy: sensitivity to aesthetic experience. An appreciation and understanding of the literature, art, and music of various cultures enriches the imagination, refines the sensibilities, deepens feelings, and provides increased awareness of the world in which we live. In a society of aesthetic illiterates not only the quality of art suffers but also the quality of life.

In connection with the study of literature it should be noted that significant value is derived from reading some foreign literature in its original language. Not only does great literature lose some of its richness in translation, but learning another language increases linguistic sensitivity and makes one more conscious of the unique potentialities and limitations of any particular tongue. Such study is also a most effective means of widening cultural horizons,
for understanding another language is a key to understanding another culture.

Another indispensable element of education for members of a democracy is a knowledge of human values. Aristotle long ago recognized that virtue is of two kinds, what he termed "moral virtue" and "intellectual virtue." Moral virtue, which we might call "character," is formed by habit. One becomes good by doing good. Repeated acts of justice and self-control result in a just, self-controlled person who not only performs such acts but does so from an unshakeable disposition.

Intellectual virtue is what we might refer to as "wisdom." In a narrow sense, a wise person is one who is a good judge of value. He can distinguish worth from cost. He is blessed with discernment, discretion, and an abundance of that most precious of qualities, common sense.

But in a broader sense, a wise person is one with intellectual perspective, who is familiar with both the foundations of knowledge and its heights, who can scrutinize the fundamental principles of thought and action while maintaining a view of the world that encompasses both what is and what ought to be. The path to wisdom in this sense lies in the study of those subtle analyses and grand visions that comprise philosophy. Such understanding affords a defense against intimidation by dogmatism while providing a framework for the operation of intelligence.

Clearly, education within a democracy must not be limited to training individuals in occupational techniques, for regardless of a citizen's mode of employment, he is expected to make judgments about sundry matters of public policy, and his education must be broad enough to enable him to do so wisely. Among the Romans such an education was permitted only to freemen (in Latin: liberi), and we thus refer to it as a "liberal education."

It would be a serious error, however, to separate liberal and vocational education. If the members of a democracy are to be not only knowledgeable participants in the political arena but also effective contributors in the social sphere, each should be provided with the necessary skills, social orientation, and intellectual perspective to succeed in some wide field of occupational endeavor. But such vocational education must not be confused with narrow job-training. Animals are broken in and trained; human beings ought to be enlightened and educated. An individual ignorant of the aims of his actions is unable to adjust in the face of changing conditions and is thus stymied by a world in flux. Sidney Hook has observed: "There is a paradox connected with vocational training. The more vocational it is, the narrower it is; the narrower it is, the less likely it is to serve usefully in earning a living . . . there is no reason—except unfamiliarity with the idea—why vocational education should not be liberalized to include the study of social, economic, historical, and ethical questions. . . ." Such broadened vocational preparation is not only of use to the future worker himself; its benefit to society is apparent to anyone who has ever been forced to deal with the mechanized mind of a bureaucrat.

As a means of further clarifying the content of a liberal education, consider the oft-repeated objection that such an education is not relevant. What is the appropriate reply?

Sometimes "relevant" is taken to mean "topical." In this sense a subject is relevant if it deals with current happenings. Thus a Greek tragedy or the history of the United States would not be relevant, whereas productions by avant-garde dramatists or
rational conflicts in America today would be. But to use the word "relevant" in this way confuses what is topical with what is timely. The plays of Sophocles were topical only during the golden age of Athens, but they are timely in every age, for they never lose their power to enrich personal experience and deepen our response to the human condition. Slaves in America were freed by 1865, but an understanding of their lives prior to then provides important insights into current social tensions. To confine a liberal education to what is topical would exclude much material of value to all members of a democracy, and so, given that meaning of the term, a liberal education need not be relevant.

On occasion, however, "relevant" is used to refer to any subject concerned with the nature, origin, or solution of the fundamental social, political, intellectual, or moral problems of our time. In this sense a liberal education is indeed relevant, since its very purpose is to enable citizens to make wise decisions about the issues confronting them.

But to avoid distorting this notion of relevance, certain precautions are in order. Not every problem is a fundamental one. A liberal education should, for example, shed light on the nature of capitalism, not merely devise plans to increase sales in a local store. Whatever the heuristic value of such case studies, intellectual perspective involves the power of abstraction.

It must also be emphasized that certain knowledge and skills not explicitly related to any specific contemporary problems are nevertheless crucial to a liberal education, since they form the basis for an intelligent approach to all problems. As we have seen, without linguistic and mathematical facility, without the power of critical thinking, without philosophical sophistication, it would be impossible to deal adequately with the crises of the age.

In addition, concentration upon contemporary events may result in a failure to recognize how inextricably they are tied to the past and how much can be learned about them through a study of the past. The urgencies of present problems should not mislead us into overlooking their historical background, for in order to know where you are going, it is advantageous to know where you have been.

One final note. I have described the content of a liberal education without providing particulars, for they necessarily vary within a changing world. We face difficulties unknown to our ancestors and likely to be forgotten by our descendants. The strength of a liberal education lies in its adaptability to each generation's problems, whether they be long-standing or of recent vintage. What we need to learn depends upon what we need to do, and while some needs remain constant, others are mutable. How easy it is to forget that the intellectual giants who contributed to the making of the modern mind were themselves breakers of tradition, impelled to forge new tools in an effort to handle what were for them the issues of the day.