Philosophy Final Essay, Research Paper

SUMMARY

Brand Blanshard, a respected philosophy professor, published an essay entitled, The Uses of a Liberal Education, which accounts for a few arguments against a liberal education, but stresses the overwhelming advantages to the same education. According to Blanshard, liberal studies are ?the sort of studies that are pursued for their own sake rather than for their utility.? (p. 121).

The first step Blanshard takes in analyzing the usefulness of a liberal education is to highlight the opposing arguments. First, he examines the price one pays for an education in such subjects as philosophy, mathematics, or history. That price is that of freedom. He enforces this with the idea that 18-year-olds are at the time in their lives where they are entranced by freedom. In studying these tedious subjects, they lose that freedom. His second point is that of the usefulness. He gives multiple examples of men who have changed the face of the earth without education, such as Thomas Edison and Henry Ford. For if it is our purpose to be educated to better our lives materialistically, a liberal education serves no purpose. Thirdly, he highlights languages, explaining that when will any of us need French or Spanish to understand something. Can we not find information in English anywhere? The only worthy case of studying languages is if one intends to live in a foreign country.

For the rest of the essay, Blanshard enforces the positives of a liberal education. First, he explores the meaning of usefulness, and comes to the conclusion that usefulness involves ?comfort and quiet and richness of the mind, which is simply good.? (p. 125). Blanshard, then, highlights three reasons why a liberal education is useful. First, it satisfies our human desire to know. Second, it is useful indirectly through our use of different perspectives. And finally, it ?may permeate with its influence all our thought and feeling and action.? (p. 124). He concludes this essay by reminding us that ?the Greek spirit still remains? (p. 134) and it remains through a liberal education.

PLATO

?The philosopher doesn?t desire one part of wisdom rather than another, but desires the whole thing.? (Plato, p. 150). In other words, a liberal education, which enhances the mind?s capacity by making available knowledge of various fields of study, is the route the most educated must take. This is the road of the Philosopher King in Plato?s world. Plato?s world was one where all human?s strive for the ultimate from, Good. In this ultimate form one finds various ideas. For example, through the Good, one obtains knowledge of the Truth, Justice, Beauty, Humanness, and gives one the mind/soul, which is an object of knowledge.

The first idea Blanshard brings forth in his essay is that ?the liberal studies are the sort of studies that are pursued for their own sake rather than for their utility.? (p. 121). This, beyond almost anything, coincides with Plato?s thoughts. In Book I of the Republic, Socrates, Plato?s teacher, discusses the idea of justice with his friends Cephalus, Polemarchus, and Thrasymachus. The most applicable to this particular situation is his conversation with Thrasymachus, where he concludes that justice is never the advantage of the stronger. Plato feels that a leader works for the sake of his servants. He pursues perfection for the sake of something other than self-gratification. If someone pursues a liberal education for its own sake, they are not pursuing it for more money, or to dominate anyone in any way. Therefore, they will not use their power of knowledge in order to harm anyone. They will more or less be benevolent in their use of that knowledge, and use it for the greater good.

Plato also highlights six subjects of study, which are reserved for the most educated, and so used in the development of tomorrow?s leaders, the Philosopher Kings. These subjects are arithmetics, geometry (2-D), solid geometry (3-D), astronomy, harmonics, and the most important of which is dialectics. In studying these particular subjects, Plato is able to develop a leader who is knowledgeable about all things. In Plato?s world, these subjects create an atmosphere very similar to that which Blanshard envisions. Blanshard says, ?They [men] philosophize because they want to understand the world they live in. I believe that, in some degree or other, everyone wants this.? (p. 126). In this he reflects the same sentiments as Plato, in that through certain studies, men seek something they have been driven to find through eternity, the truth. Now, Plato?s ideas in this case coincide to a certain extent. However, Plato feels that a person must be forced to turn completely around. Once turned around, Plato?s ideal human appears similar to Blanshard?s in that he/she will not digress into an immature mindset. At this point, both Plato and Blanshard are agreeable. Once Plato?s ideal human is turned around, he/she strives to see all that is true, and obtain all knowledge.

Another point of similarity is where Blanshard says, ?many things simply remain invisible till we see them through others? eyes.? (p. 130). In so, speaking to the fact that through liberal studies, one ?not only borrows another?s sense of sight, but their sense of values, also.? (p.130). In this, Blanshard speaks to a similar idea as to that of the cave according to Plato. Plato has an idea that we all must be led into the light, where truth and goodness await us in the light. We are led out of Plato?s cave and into the light, and shown truth, and so, because of the person who led us out of darkness, and into the light, we, in as sense, use other?s for our education in Plato?s world. In the same way, Blanshard, through the use of different studies and different authors, uses others to arrive at the truth.

One idea, in particular, which I feel Plato would disagree with, is that ?liberal studies satisfy some of our elemental hungers, the hunger to know.? (p. 125). Plato, in Book II of the Republic, describes a city based on the idea that ?humans are not self-sufficient.? (Plato, p. 44). Plato also says that our ?first need is for food, our second need is for shelter, and our third is for clothes.? (Plato, p. 44). Nowhere does Plato bring forth the idea that knowledge as an elemental hunger. Now, the Philosopher King is all-knowledgeable, but the purpose of the city is not for all citizens to become more knowledgeable, but rather that they sustain life. Again, the city is formed because we are not self-sufficient, and therefore we need each other to help provide for our basic needs, none of which are knowledge. Knowledge does not sustain life. Food, shelter, and clothing help to sustain life in a basic sense.

Overall, I feel that Plato definitely agrees with Blanshard that the liberal education is useful. Blanshard, at the end of his essay says, ?what is significant about a person or a people is the invisible things about them,? (p. 134) referring to the idea that the liberal education helps contribute to the entire person, and what kind of person we become. We borrow other people?s ideas, take their advice, and create a world of our own. Plato seeks knowledge, and truth, and through his own personal studies of philosophy, history, and mathematics, all of which are liberal studies, became a mind referenced by politicians, lawyers, and ethicists. In fact, Blanshard concludes his own essay by saying, ?No doubt there were hardheaded practical men in Athens who stopped before the door of Plato?s Academy and asked what was the use of it all. They and their names have vanished; the little Academy became a thousand academies among nations then unborn.? (p. 134).

DESCARTES

?I thought that book learning, at least the kind whose reasonings are merely probable and that do not have any demonstrations, having been composed and enlarged little by little from the opinions of many different persons, does not draw nearly so close to the truth as the simple reasonings that a man of good sense can naturally make about the things he encounters.? (Descartes, p. 7). Ren? Descartes is a man who firmly believes in self-introspection. His ideas are based on locking himself in a room completely separate from the rest of the world, and thinking. Descartes would definitely be opposed to Blanshard?s The Uses of a Liberal Education in that Descartes is very anti-educational. His ideas depend on the individual, and not the community. His ideas directly counter those of Blanshard.

Blanshard says, when speaking of the arguments against a liberal education, that ?a liberal education calls for a great outlay in time, money, and effort, for which little or nothing useful is gained in return.? (p. 124). For this, Descartes would definitely find himself in agreement. First of all, Descartes would claim that the education received through the liberal arts relies upon the thoughts and experiences of others, rather than the truth as ?I?, an individual, has observed. Descartes says, ?I learned not to believe anything too firmly of which I had been persuaded only by example and custom.? (Descartes, p. 6). Therefore, according to Descartes, the money and time spent on a liberal education is a waist. Descartes feels that through self-introspection, which is free, one finds truth and knowledge. He feels that one can not rely on the thoughts of philosophers, theologians, or any other learned person. Their knowledge is just that, their knowledge, not another?s.

However, along with this idea of relying on other?s knowledge, Descartes also says, ?it is good to have examined all these disciplines [science, jurisprudence, and medicine], even the most superstition-ridden and the most false of them, in order to know their true worth and to guard against being deceived by them.? (Descartes, p. 4). Although Descartes appears to be set in his mind that all knowledge should be derived from oneself, he acknowledges the fact that having and understanding of this knowledge can help us not to be deceived. This is a slight contradiction that allows some room for support of Blanshard?s ideas. Through this, he concedes the fact that this education might actually be worth something in the end. Maybe the time was well spent.

One point, which would strongly be supported by a great mind like Plato, is utterly loathed by one like Descartes. ?Indeed many things remain simply invisible till we see them through others? eyes.? (p. 130) is a statement that contradicts Descartes? path. Descartes feels that in accepting the thoughts of all those before us, i.e. Plato, John Locke, Sartre, Augustine, Mohammed, Jesus, and the many more great minds of history, all of which have differing opinions, we lose a battle. In looking to another for our own betterment of mind, we already have made up our minds. It is a waist of time for us to seek and accept those thoughts of others. He says that in his own method, he ?never accepts anything as true that he did not plainly know to be such.? (Descartes, p. 11).

In defense of a liberal education Blanshard says, ?the mind that wants to know can find fascination along a hundred avenues.? With this, Descartes can definitely agree. Descartes feels that his method is not necessarily the greatest. Descartes, himself says that ?my purpose here is not to teach the method that everyone ought to follow in order to conduct his reason well, but merely to show how I have tried to conduct my own.? (Descartes, p. 2). Descartes, in this instance, claims that through the use of different highways, one can reach the same destination in the same amount of time.

Descartes is a man who is set in his ways, but also one who leaves room for differences. He is not hardheaded, but there are ideas, which he is unable to change or reach middle ground upon. He is extremely insistent on self-introspection, which leads to greater knowledge and truth. However, his method is not always the greatest for all, and therefore he leaves room for differences. Descartes would appear to be against Blanshard?s view that a liberal education is useful because of his views on organized education. He feels that through organized education one is deceived with the thoughts and reasoning of many different people. He feels that one can never come to his own conclusion without being pestered into a certain frame of mind by a specific philosopher or theologian.

Personal Analysis

I, on a personal level find Blanshard?s essay true and honest as to the benefits and usefulness of a liberal education. I feel that an education in the liberal arts offers a person a well rounded mind, something not often found in this society. This society is often times much too closed-minded. And this is evident in the absence of considering hearts. The liberal education offers someone many different methods of finding the truth for oneself, and I believe, without any doubt, that the truth can be different for all. A liberal education provides its students with knowledge of past mistakes, future advice, and other ideas, which play to the heart of each human being.

Although enormous amounts of money are spent on an education that might not bring forth the most attractive pay check, it offers ?comfort and richness of mind? (p. 125), a priceless attribute. How many people can say, at the end of the day they are happy? How many can even say they are satisfied? People, nowadays, are so often in a hurry to make that next dollar, to even degrade their neighbor in order to accomplish that feat. At the end of the day they may have that dollar, but they often times lack a sense of acceptance among others, according to many to be one of the greatest gifts in the world. People who study in order to have a profession seek that profession as their end. They treat people as a means to get to that end, their profession and the dollar bill that it accompanies. Who is to say that because a liberal education does not bring home the almighty dollar, it does not offer satisfaction? It offers satisfaction in itself, as Blanshard says.

One point made by Blanshard that holds great weight with myself is when he says, ?Indeed many things remain simply invisible till we see them through others? eyes.? (p.130). In taking other?s advise, we open our doors more fully to the truth. Many people have lived similar lives to our own. Many people have experienced certain situations we might be in the midst of. Many people offer a different perspective that might help us more fully understand the entire picture. Through other people?s eyes, our eyes can become much clearer.

Another great benefit of the liberal education is brought forth when Blanshard says, ?if his thought and feeling are affected, so surely will his action be.? (p. 133). Therefore, through a liberal education, which provides its students with ideas of philosophy and theology, one?s personal actions might become more reverent. Through the study of a man like Jesus Christ, although it will not fatten one?s pocket, might lead to greater satisfaction through actions. In this, I am saying that when one treats another with respect and love, often times those same sentiments are returned. Love begets love, just like violence begets violence. If seeing things more clearly through philosophy or theology can change one?s actions; perhaps one?s life will be changed for the better.

Although I agree with much of what Blanshard says, I must part with the idea that a liberal education ?directly satisfies some of out elemental hungers.? (p.125). This specific idea is absolutely absurd. The gift of any education is strictly that, a gift. It satisfies no basic hunger. There is no basic hunger, to know. The third world is filled with people whose basic hungers are not met everyday. People lack food, clothing, and shelter, the things which the city is formed to provide. A young child, starving to death and dying of malaria, is not attempting to fulfill his basic need for knowledge. He is hoping to survive the next day. Knowledge is nowhere near a basic need. It is a luxury reserved for the wealthy in all states. A higher education can only be afforded by those with money. They are not seeking to fulfill something without which they will die. A liberal education is a gift, nothing more.

For the most part, I strongly agree with Blanshard that a liberal education is extremely useful, despite the critics and their desire for money. A liberal education offers a comfort of mind that can not be touched by the sharpest sword or the strongest man. A liberal education, through the knowledge derived, is a lifelong gift of happiness and freedom.

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