

LEARNING FOR MEANING'S SAKE

"A university will have ceased to exist when its learning has degenerated into what is now called research, when its teaching has become mere instruction and occupies the whole of an undergraduate's time, and when those who came to be taught come, not in search of their intellectual fortune but with a vitality so unroused or so exhausted that they wish only to be provided with a serviceable moral and intellectual outfit; when they come with no understanding of the manners of the conversation but desire only a qualification for earning a living or a certificate to let them in on the exploitation of the world."
—Michael Oakeshott²⁹⁹

In my introduction, I claimed that the ideal of the university must be rearticulated, and I proceeded to outline the presuppositions, elements, and implications of hermeneutic university education in which learning is for "meaning's sake." I do not intend for my ideal to be absolute, but rather to respond to this particular historical era and its struggles. We have fanatically developed the ability to produce knowledge, leaving our skills of crafting meaning by the wayside.³⁰⁰ The university has an abundance of knowledge but lacks the wisdom to use it meaningfully. Meanwhile, people inside and outside the university walls search for meaning but are imprisoned in a lexicon of clichés and sound bites that stunts this search.

Construing the university as a place of meaning-making would give the university a "meaning" (a *raison d'être*) to remedy its current identity crisis, while restoring the place of studies in meaning to higher education. Learning to make meaning in higher education would enable people to make meaning in all aspects of their lives, thereby responding to the widespread cultural struggle with meaninglessness and our overreliance on banal interpretive explanations. In other words, a premise of this work has been that solving the crisis of meaning in the university is essential to solving the crisis of meaning in society at large, as the aptitudes developed in hermeneutic education should carry over into the way one approaches all of life.

To respond to these interrelated crises, I proposed that we posit natality as the aim of hermeneutic education. But for this ideal to make sense required an exploration of what meaning is like and the role it plays in human life. I argued that meaning exists in the back-and-forth movement between banality and natality, from taking interpretations for granted to thinking about and creating new ones. Because we tend to remain in banality, an education in meaning-making must cultivate a disposition for natality, which is an aptitude for thinking about meaning.

CONCLUSION

To consider how everyday existential struggles with meaning and academic study are related, I sought guidance from the philosophers of the art of living. They show how formal study and everyday life can be integrally related, implying that it is only a strange contemporary phenomenon to divorce them. Furthermore, they propose the essential elements of higher education—learning from exemplars and making one’s own claims—which I explored further in chapters 4 and 5.

While the philosophers of the art of living elucidate the relationship between academe and life, the philosophers of hermeneutic liberal learning provide the foundation of my ideal of a hermeneutic liberal education, including the ideas that it involves joining a conversation, confronting ethical matters, acknowledging contingency, and striving to narrate the events that occur in our daily lives. These thinkers also raise puzzling questions about interpretations and hermeneutic education to which I responded in developing my ideal.

My initial emphasis in chapter 2 on thinking might now seem peculiar in light of the later discussion of story-telling, which appears as the culmination of meaning-making in chapter 5. However, thinking is essential to the ideal of hermeneutic education, because it provides the grounds of making meaning; without thinking, our actions and speech could not be fully meaningful. In addition, Arendt’s account of thinking provides an intellectual landscape within which to situate the ideal; it gives us the vocabulary with which to enter the discourse on meaning and meaning-making.

Learning to think is realized through particular activities of study. Arendt, paraphrasing Socrates, writes: “...but if the wind of thinking...has shaken you from sleep and made you fully awake and alive, then you will see that you have nothing in your grasp but perplexities, and the best we can do with them is share them with each other....”³⁰¹ Apprenticeship and story-telling foster and respond to the experience of thinking; they are the means by which we receive the wind of thinking and share our own thoughts.

In apprenticeship, we immerse ourselves in another’s perplexing thoughts. In so doing, we learn what it is like to take another interpretation seriously and develop an appreciation for the role of interpretations in our lives. In addition, as the author works through his own perplexities, he offers us a new way to think, thereby remedying our perplexity. That is, apprenticeship broadens the ways we can understand and gives us new lenses through which to understand. Although an interpretation is initially new to us, it can become a lens through which we unthinkingly understand the world in banality. At the same time, because a hermeneutically educated person would be aware of the importance of interpretations, any interpretation can become a conversation-partner as we test its application to a particular case.

In story-telling, we consider interpretive claims for the sake of making our own. By “making our own,” I do not intend to suggest some form of radical, decontextualized expression, but rather an individual’s attempt to make meaning within the situation and world in which she lives, from which she gains understanding, and to which she contributes. We share our perplexities with others by telling stories that explain the significance of things, implying claims about the truth of why things occur as they do.