

# *Great Books Business Education*

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This paper suggests that the opportunity for the synthesis of liberal and professional education urged by Maritain may already be here in a compelling way. I propose that the development of modern business activity as the application of knowledge to knowledge demands the cultivation of the natural intelligence through the kind of great books education outlined by Maritain.

Students of the forces shaping the future of business have for some time asserted that we are entering an era in which knowledge is the principle business resource. In his 1993 book *Post-Capitalist Society*, Peter Drucker, one of the most widely read and influential contemporary management theorists, provides a useful analysis of this trend. Drucker describes the phenomena that are leading to the emergence of the knowledge society and the transformation of business into essentially the application of knowledge to knowledge. In this context, Drucker addresses the kind of education the business manager will require. While I believe that he falls short of an adequate understanding of contemporary management education, he points the way to the heart of the issue.

Drucker understands knowledge as a utility that proves itself in transitive action, i.e., in results outside the person. He explicitly rejects knowledge as self-development or self-knowledge. Drucker discerns three stages of development of business, each stage caused by a shift in the meaning of knowledge.

The Industrial Revolution found its genesis in the *Encyclopedia* of the French Enlightenment, wherein traditional crafts were abstracted into methodologies, i.e., technes. These technes ultimately became disciplines, e.g. engineering, and thus, according to Drucker, a plurality of distinct and equal "knowledges."

The Productivity Revolution began in the late nineteenth century and crested during the Second World War. Its principal representative was Frederick Taylor, who reduced labor to elementary steps and thereby allowed unskilled workers to perform the tasks necessary to make the increasingly sophisticated products of modern society.

The Management Revolution is the current stage of business development. Drucker describes the Management Revolution as follows:

The traditional “factors of production”—land (i.e. natural resources), labor and capital—have become secondary. They can be obtained and obtained easily, provided there is knowledge. And knowledge in this new sense means knowledge as utility, knowledge as a means to obtain social and economic results. . . . These developments, whether desirable or not, are responses to an irreversible change: *knowledge is now being applied to knowledge*. This is the third and perhaps the ultimate step in the transformation of knowledge. Supplying knowledge to produce this result is, in effect, what we mean by management. But knowledge is now also being applied systematically and purposefully to decide what new knowledge is needed, whether it is feasible, and what has to be done to make knowledge effective. It is being applied, in other words, to systematic innovation.<sup>1</sup>

Complementing this understanding is Drucker’s view of the business organization. An organization is a human group composed of specialists. Its function is to make knowledges productive. However, systematic innovation requires the organization be designed to allow knowledge specialists to pursue their work as deeply and intricately as possible.

Drucker recognizes that knowledges, as utilities, are sterile in themselves. Specialists pursuing ever more detailed exploration of their particular fields cannot make knowledge productive. The productivity of knowledge requires that the various knowledges pursued within an organization be, in Drucker’s term, “welded” together to produce a marketable product or service.

On this account, the management of the organization faces two critical questions. First, what must the manager know and do to bring together the work of specialists to fulfill the business organization’s mission? Second, since the continuously deepening knowledge the organization needs is available only through persons, how does the manager attract, motivate and retain highly qualified, knowledgeable workers?

<sup>1</sup> Peter F. Drucker, *Post-Capitalist Society* (New York: Harper Business, 1994), p. 42.

These developments produce, according to Drucker, the critical need to reexamine what it means to be an educated person and, more specifically, the educational requirements of business managers. The definition of the educated person is the central issue in the transition from the post-capitalist society to the knowledge society.

Drucker sees higher education divided essentially in two groups. On one hand, he places the deconstructionists, post-Marxists, radical feminists, and others, who argue that there can be no such thing as a universally educated person. Drucker describes their opposition as the "Humanists" who still hold to the possibility of the universally educated person. He writes,

The Humanist critics demand a return to the nineteenth century, to the "liberal arts," the "classics". . . . They do not, so far, repeat the assertion made by Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler fifty years ago at the University of Chicago that "knowledge" in its entirety consists of a hundred "Great Books." But they are in direct line of descent from the Hutchins-Adler "Return to Pre-Modernity."<sup>2</sup>

Drucker rejects both camps: the deconstructionists *et alia* because they have abandoned any hope for the universally educated person, the Humanists because their view of the liberal arts spurns integration with technes, the new knowledges, and because they offer only a bridge to the past, continuing to see liberal education as a social ornament.

What education is needed for the knowledge society? In order to make knowledge productive, managers must know how to relate knowledge to knowledge; therefore, management education aimed at producing simply another specialist will fail. As Drucker proposes,

We neither need nor will get "polymaths" who are at home in the many knowledges; in fact we will probably become even more specialized. But we do need—and what will define the educated person in the knowledge society—is the ability to *understand* the various knowledges. What is each one about? What is it trying to do? What are its central concerns and theories? What major new insights has it produced? What are its important areas of ignorance, its problems, its challenges?<sup>3</sup>

At this point, Drucker's vision of the education of the business manager meets Maritain's understanding of the development of the natural intelligence through great books education. If Drucker is correct about the new role of knowledge in business, then I propose that Maritain's view of great

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 211–12.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217.

books education is an essential and animating element of business management education. This assertion will come into focus if we look at the ways in which Maritain's view of great books education differs from that of Mortimer J. Adler.

Adler and Maritain agree on many fundamental issues of educational philosophy, including the central importance of the great books program. However, Maritain's view departs from Adler's in two ways. First, Maritain understands that the nature of the person requires liberal education to engage transitive action and business. He advocates an explicit synthesis between liberal and business education at the undergraduate level. Adler, on the other hand, draws an absolute and unyielding line between vocational education and liberal education. Second, while Adler asserts that undergraduate great books education should be concerned with the development of the essential means to knowledge and nothing more, Maritain understands undergraduate great books education to be essentially concerned with the development of the natural intelligence. This implies not only the grasping of the means of education, but also a real, intuitive grasping of the beauty and meaning of the disciplines. These two distinctions establish the basis for the relevance of great books education to contemporary business management education.

Maritain understands the unchanging mission of education to be the formation of man as man. He seeks "an integral education for an integral humanism."<sup>4</sup> Education should account for and unify all that is proper to the human being. For Maritain work is proper to the human person and directed toward freedom.<sup>5</sup> He advocates the subjective dimension of labor and in this regard his understanding of labor is a precursor of that expressed in the encyclical *On Human Work*.<sup>6</sup>

In *Education at the Crossroads*, Maritain called for education that overcomes "cleavage between work or useful activity and the blossoming of spiritual life and disinterested joy in knowledge and beauty."<sup>7</sup> Maritain did

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1943), p. 88.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Education of Man*, eds. Donald and Idella Gallagher (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962), p. 150.

<sup>6</sup> John Paul II, *On Human Work* (Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, 1981). Cf. Jacques Maritain, "Convocation Address" in *Academic Convocation Commemorating the Tercentenary of the Birth of St. John Baptist de la Salle* (New York: Manhattan College, 1951), pp. 148–151.

<sup>7</sup> Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, p. 89.

not view liberal education as merely a social ornament for the leisure classes. In his address on the occasion of the tercentenary of the birth of St. John Baptist de La Salle, Maritain asserted that the synthesis of vocational and liberal education was implicit in the Christian Brothers' education of the working class poor of seventeenth and eighteenth-century France.

Adler, by contrast, is not shy about asserting the Aristotelian dichotomy between liberal and servile arts:

I hope I step on nobody's toes too hard when I say, as I must say, that . . . it is an absolute misuse of school to include any vocational training at all.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps Drucker has good reason to believe that the Hutchins-Adler line of descent turns its back on business; however, it should be clear that Maritain asserts a vital relationship between the world of business and liberal education.

Maritain does not view liberal education as simply an exercise of the mind preliminary to, and in the service of, a practical education. Any notion that a student should, for example, take two years of general requirements and then—perhaps having become more clever or having acquired useful mathematical or rhetorical skills—get on with a business major, misses the significance of “integration” and “synthesis.”<sup>9</sup>

The integration or synthesis between liberal education and business education is shaped by Maritain's notion of the hierarchy of values. In every system of education there is a conscious or unconscious hierarchy of values that gives direction to the education process. For the Thomist, knowledge and love of what is eternal are superior to knowledge and love of what is temporal. However, an inextricable part of that principle is that whatever is eternal will “embrace and quicken” what is temporal.<sup>10</sup> Maritain puts the point this way:

[I]t must be said that knowledge is contemplative in nature, and that education, in its final and highest achievements, tends to develop the contemplative capacity of the human mind. It does so neither in order to have the mind come to a stop in the act of knowing and contemplating, nor in order to make knowledge and contemplation subservient to

<sup>8</sup> Mortimer J. Adler, *Reforming Education*, ed. Geraldine Van Doren (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1988), p. 105.

<sup>9</sup> Here I rely upon Michael J. Naughton and Thomas Bausch, “The Integrity of an Undergraduate Catholic School of Management: Four Integrating Characteristics,” unpublished manuscript.

<sup>10</sup> Maritain, *The Education of Man*, p. 53.

action, but in order that once man has reached a stage where the harmony of his inner energies has been brought to full completion, his action on the world and on the human community, and his creative power at the service of his fellow—men, may overflow from his contemplative contact with reality—both with the visible and invisible realities in the midst of which he lives and moves.<sup>11</sup>

Effective transitive action, work and its management, follow upon and arise from the contemplation of creation. Work is a response to reality.

This leads to Maritain's second point of departure from Adler and back to another look at Drucker's definition of the knowledge society's educated person.

In his 1941 essay "The Order of Learning," Adler argued that the great books program is the best means to achieve the ends of Catholic education. He asserted that at the undergraduate level the liberal arts of reading, listening, speaking, observing and measuring, the indispensable means to the attainment of the intellectual virtues, are all that should be taught. Represented by the great books, the subject matter becomes the means by which the student learns the arts. The great books are like bones on which the student sharpens his intellectual teeth. The books must be tough, not the pre-digested mush of text books. In the end, the quality of the education is measured by looking at the effect on the student's teeth, not the effect on the bone.<sup>12</sup>

In *Education at the Crossroads*, Maritain made a detailed analysis of the order of learning. Taking up the metaphor of the puppy (the student) chewing on a bone (the great books), he commented,

To bring the metaphor to completion, it should be added that this large bone is a marrow bone, and that not only do the puppy's teeth have to grow sharper, but his living substance also has to feed itself on the valuable marrow. . . . The reason why college education must embrace *all liberal arts*, as required for all, is precisely the fact that it is only concerned with the comprehension thereof by the youth's *natural* intelligence, progressing in this way toward the *habitus* or virtues. . . . [E]ducation in the liberal arts is not only an education in the practical and "artistic" rules of good thinking . . . (that is to say, an attainment of indispensable *means*), it is also and mainly an education in knowledge and insight, and in a real grasping of truth and beauty (that is to say, an attainment—proportionate to the universe of thought of the youth—of

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>12</sup> Adler, *Reforming Education*, pp. 176–191.

the ends of the intellectual effort which are the various subject matters).<sup>13</sup>

Maritain argued that the distinction between natural intelligence and the intellectual virtues must be maintained in order to have effective undergraduate liberal education. Once the threshold of virtue is crossed, knowledge becomes necessarily particularized. Universal knowledge, the capacity to integrate knowledge and understand the relationship between disciplines, is only possible at the level of natural intelligence. The object of undergraduate education is not the possession of the intellectual virtues as such. The development of the natural intelligence allows the student to grasp the object, nature and scope, and the particular species of beauty each of the sciences and arts discloses to us.<sup>14</sup> Thus Drucker's definition of the educated person is met.

The development of the natural intelligence according to a firmly established hierarchy of values is essential for the formation of the human person. Maritain insisted that unity and integration are necessary to unlock the power of intuitive grasping, the genuine and living fire of the natural intelligence. This permits the student to remain the master of the material offered to him or her and to develop as a free and responsible person even in a world of hyper-specialization. Any undergraduate education that passes over the development of the natural intelligence and attempts the immediate development of particularized knowledge will produce, in Maritain's view, a "learned intellectual dwarf."<sup>15</sup> Neither the polymath nor the intellectual dwarf is properly equipped to pursue the application of knowledge to knowledge.

In "Thomist Views on Education," Maritain sketched the organization of an undergraduate college to fulfill the goals of liberal education in accordance with the hierarchy of values. It should be essentially concerned with the development of the natural intelligence and also allow the student to take the first steps toward the acquisition of the intellectual skills proper to the student's intended occupation. A core of liberal arts, explicitly including physics, natural sciences and mathematics, would be taught based on "the ways and methods" of the great books program.<sup>16</sup> In addition, "institutes of

<sup>13</sup> Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, pp. 70–71.

<sup>14</sup> Maritain, *The Education of Man*, p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 73–74.

oriented humanities” would permit students to study the beginnings of their intended occupations, in vital relationship to the great books core. One of the institutes Maritain proposed is for the education of businesspersons.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, accounting, marketing, finance—the nuts and bolts of business—would still be taught. However, all the faculty, including the business faculty, would be primarily engaged in the development of the natural intelligence through the great books core. In this way, undergraduate business management education can develop students’ natural capacity to integrate knowledge and assist them in understanding how business skills might serve that integration.

This vision of undergraduate education presents a radical challenge to American colleges. But what are the alternatives? Drucker’s reliance on the rationalist and utilitarian traditions does not point the way to a resolution of the two challenges he claims management will face in the knowledge society. Those traditions have devolved into deconstruction and other forms of postmodern ideology, and thus provide no basis for the integration and synthesis of knowledge. The refusal to see knowledge as self-development presents an insidious obstruction to the attraction and retention of genuinely knowledgeable workers. If their work is not understood as self-development, then personal policies will be based on the instrumentalization of the intimate human act of knowing, and, therefore, on an ever deeper alienation of the person from work. Maritain’s understanding of business education allows us to perceive the business organization as a community of persons. This opens up the possibility of the application of knowledge to knowledge in a world of hyper-specialization as well as the introduction of personnel policies based on the unified life of the worker. It also provides, for example, a basis for a comprehension of the relationship between business and the common good that moves beyond the sterile chess board of stakeholder analysis.

An examination of the role of the natural intelligence in the education of contemporary business managers should revitalize the great books program in American higher education.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.