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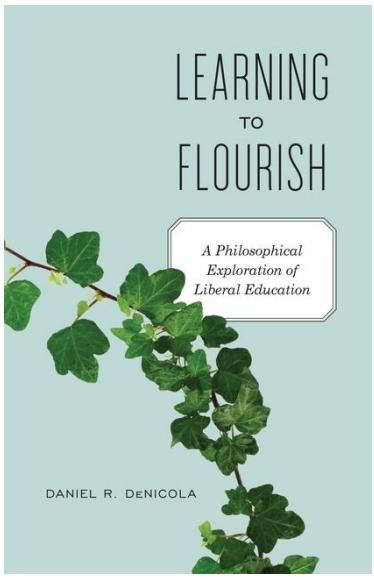
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DeNicola, Daniel R. (2012) *Learning to Flourish. A Philosophical Exploration of Liberal Education*. London: Continnum.

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Philosophy of education is not the usual approach to contemporary challenges in schools and universities. Current trends in education seem to favour standardization approaches to assessment, statistical analyses of effectiveness, and measurements of the impact of teaching practices. Nevertheless, many crucial debates in education must be addressed from the deep and critical perspective that only philosophy can provide.

A case in point is found in the debate surrounding liberal education, and it is the reason why I found DeNicola's book so pertinent. The book is divided in four different

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parts. The first sets the grounds for discussion by outlining liberal education's key components and considering different conceptions of it. This part is essential to understand **DeNicola**'s proposal, as he explains the objective of his theory, his basic conception of liberal education, and the main elements of that conception. The second part describes available paradigms of liberal education. Each of these is analysed from perspective of a representative author, along with practical examples and relevant critiques. The third part gives special attention to the moral component of liberal education. Here, DeNicola incorporates a discussion of the moral values underpinning liberal education, the notion of intrinsic value that the whole project of liberal education argues for, and finally, what he considers to be the moral aims of liberal education. In the final part, the book addresses the obstacles, threats and prospects of liberal education.

Liberal education has for decades been a contested concept with several interpretations. As Law wrote in 1965, "liberal education is becoming difficult to pinpoint in definition. The examples of liberal education in practice have been dwindling in number. What it should be and what it is are too often dichotomous" (Law, 1965). This statement still applies and provides the starting point for DeNicola's philosophical examination. By unravelling the theoretical and practical critiques of liberal education, the book introduces some of the most contested issues on this tradition of educational theory. From its most reluctant reformists to its committed adherents and followers, it becomes clear that there are many different views as to what liberal education is and why it is important.

DeNicola's goal is to provide a theory of liberal education that faces these critiques and that responds positively to current challenges. To do so, he develops what he calls a "thin" theory of liberal education, comprehensive enough to include all the different paradigms of this tradition yet sufficiently delineated to distinguish the concept of liberal education, its components and its aims. His proposal seeks to provide a dynamic notion able to respond to ongoing scientific, technological, social, and cultural developments rather than a fixed and static definition. He does a remarkable work in this respect, since his theory of liberal education is both flexible enough to incorporate different

perspectives and evolve with circumstances, yet also strong enough to provide a clear and guiding purpose.

One of the main contributions of the book is the development of a theory that allows us to understand liberal education via its primary objective rather than our personal conceptions. DeNicola's proposal gives an alternative that goes beyond the contested nature of liberal education, setting a common ground to build upon. He characterises liberal education as a tradition of educational theory and practice that aims to develop and cultivate the good life; in his own terms, the "structured learning that aims at human flourishing" (DeNicola, 2012, p. 37). Rather than focusing on curricular contents or pedagogical perspectives, DeNicola emphasizes this defining aim of liberal education as the cornerstone of his conceptual analysis. He suggests we understand liberal education by identifying that for which it strives.

But the attempt to provide a compelling conception of the 'good life' and what is entailed by human flourishing invites controversy. As part of his proposal, DeNicola identifies and analyses five paradigms of liberal education that derive from different answers to the questions of what the good life is and how liberal education contributes to it. The first one grounds the notion of a good life and individual flourishing in the process of enculturation. For this paradigm, the transmission of culture is the objective of liberal education, since the study of classic texts is what enables students to join the intellectual dialogue with the greatest authors and ideas of humanity. It is through this particular dialogue that one can discover what the good life is and how to flourish in order to cultivate it. In contrast, the second paradigm, considers self-actualization as the aim of liberal education, and as such, is the individual process of development the main objective to pursue. The third paradigm does not focus on the personal possibilities for flourishing; rather it is concerned with the ability to understand the world. As such, within this paradigm, liberal education focuses on the advancement of structures of knowledge and methods of inquiry that help in the understanding of the world around us. Only through this knowledge we will be able to discern the good life we look forward to achieving. The fourth paradigm goes a step forward and seeks not only to understand the world but also to engage with it. For this paradigm, liberal

education should prepare individuals to become involved in changing the world. Finally, the last paradigm looks at liberal arts as skills of learning that help one to flourish as a life-long process of cultivation through learning. Some of the richest sections of the book are the ones in which DeNicola exposes the arguments for and against each of these paradigms, demonstrating its advantages and limitations. Through this exposition, DeNicola develops his argument that these paradigms for liberal education are complementary rather than competing options.

There is a set of issues, however, that DeNicola does not consider as extensively as perhaps he should, especially given its centrality for defining the good life and how it is to be cultivated through education: cultural diversity and ethical pluralism. Although he mentions the role of one's culture for flourishing, and discusses the possibility that diverse conceptions of the good life are influenced by their cultural contexts, this insight is not pursued. Communities enact diverse cultural values and they are sometimes contrary to those proposed by the liberal model. What is then the role of liberal education in such communities, if there is any role at all? Cultural diversity poses a real problem to any educational theory that incorporates notions such as intrinsic values, freedom, autonomy or good life. Because "standards and values are relative to the culture from which they derive" (American Anthropological Association in Little, 1999, p. 153), the key terms of DeNicola's argument are likely to be understood quite differently according to their cultural context. Any defence of liberal education should take this fact into consideration. This discussion seems to me to be central to current debates in philosophy of education, in particularly in the area of liberal education

This book will be useful for members of the general public interested in liberal education, and it is extremely applicable for teachers, students and school personnel who are embedded in programmes of liberal arts. Since DeNicola does a thorough work explaining the philosophical proposals of Aristotle, John Stuart Mill and John Dewey, the book is accessible to those unfamiliar with such thinkers. It also provides an interesting and lively survey of the different perspectives on offer and integrates these perspectives into a coherent picture of liberal education. In doing so, the book is also a good

methodological example in philosophy of education. DeNicola develops a well-organised, strong and clearly-argued conceptual analysis. As such, it will be useful to philosophers of education in general, but particularly to students of this discipline interested in the structure and presentation of a philosophical argument.

In summary, *Learning to flourish* is highly relevant to today's debates over the nature and value of liberal education. It addresses fundamental issues underpinning any defensible concept of liberal education and speaks compellingly to contemporary challenges.

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