

AMERICA'S UPSIDE-DOWN DOCTRINE OF EDUCATION:

ALBERT JAY NOCK'S THEORY
OF WHAT HAS GONE WRONG — OR IS IT RIGHT?

Steven James Bartlett

ABSTRACT

We often do not realize that we are making important and sometimes unjustified assumptions when these have become so habitual and natural for us to assume that we must strain even to question them. The American system of education makes such assumptions, which were questioned and criticized nearly a hundred years ago by author and educational theorist Albert Jay Nock. In this essay, we consider Nock's theory of American education in order to bring attention to bear on our unexamined assumptions about the objectives of education and how to attain them. We shall find that certain of these assumptions stand greatly in need of the support of evidence.

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Keywords: American education, theory of education,
Albert Jay Nock, liberal arts, vocational education

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Here the only reason for belief is that everybody has believed the thing for so long that it must be true.... That man will undoubtedly do right, and be a friend of men, who shall call it in question and see that there is no evidence for it, [and] help his neighbours to see as he does....

No simplicity of mind, no obscurity of station, can escape the universal duty of questioning all that we believe.

It is true that this duty is a hard one, and the doubt which comes out of it is often a very bitter thing. It leaves us bare and powerless where we thought that we were safe and strong....

It is wrong in all cases to believe on insufficient evidence; and where it is presumption to doubt and to investigate, there it is worse than presumption to believe.

– William K. Clifford (1877, pp. 293, 302-303, 309)

There are periods during human history when assumptions become so widespread, so commonplace, and so habitual that they attain the status of unquestioned doctrine. When the members of a society embrace conformity with the country's prevailing assumptions to the extent that the members of American society today have, it becomes increasingly difficult to “think outside the box,” to develop, much less retain, a broader perspective that is, by its definition, unconventional and is likely to be viewed with suspicion as counter-cultural, anti-

establishment, and, in the extreme, heretical and therefore, for many, objectionable.

It is the author's conviction that precisely at such times in our history, when doctrinal assumptions have attained this level of unquestionability and rigidity, it can be profitable to push beyond the confines of the dogmas we hold dear, to take a step beyond our preferred beliefs, and to consider what it would be like to go against the grain so that we might develop, and perhaps retain, a broader perspective.

The motivation and the objective in doing this is to assist readers — those who are willing — to recognize the boundaries of a box in which they may unknowingly find themselves, the boundaries of which they may not be aware, or not even be able to imagine, that such boundaries exist.

To this end, let us consider a theory of education that was once proposed close to a hundred years ago by a now seldom-discussed educational theorist. The observations of the American educational system that he began to make in the late 1890s, and the theory of education that he developed on their basis, are today without any doubt scandalous and biting critical of an ideal that has come to dominate American education. His observations and the theory of education that he came to endorse are likely to shock the average reader today, and may sting him or her to the quick by the implications of his criticisms.

The psychological and intellectual effect of being shocked and stung by views that would question one's own preferred beliefs can elicit very different reactions. Such reactions have a well-known range that includes a knee-jerk reaction of hostility and antagonism; a self-reinforcing and greatly strengthened conviction that one's favored beliefs must simply be right by the very fact that they have been placed in question; a willingness to consider, perhaps just for the sake of argument and intellectual play, such contrarian views; or, much less commonly, a willingness to consider, however unlikely this may at first seem, that one's preferred beliefs may not, in fact, be as justified and founded upon

unimpeachable evidence as one originally thought. Some of these psychological and cognitive shocks to the system can be healthy, but some clearly are not. Hostility and antagonism, and the strengthening of dogmas as a result of questioning them, have very seldom produced good outcomes. Whenever we push the boundaries of conventional thinking and of the values that are supported, reinforced, and magnified through conformity, good or bad things may happen. Saints may be crucified and revolutionists martyred, or alternatively, sometimes, Nobel Prizes may be awarded. Usually, however, questioning the status quo is most conveniently and efficiently handled by society by ignoring the questioning and thereby sweeping its dissidents under the carpet so that they can be conveniently silenced and forgotten.

This has happened to the theory of education advocated long ago by Albert Jay Nock. It warrants being dusted off, if only for the salubrious effects that shocks and stings may sometimes bring about.

He was born in 1870 in Pennsylvania, the son of a steel mill worker and Episcopal priest (combined in one person, his father). After Nock graduated from St. Stephen's College (now Bard College), he played baseball in the minor leagues, but gave this up to become an Episcopal priest like his father. In his late 30s, he then also gave up the ministry and became a journalist, prolific author, and theorist of education. He published numerous books, some of the best known of which are *Jefferson* (a biography), *Our Enemy: the State, Free Speech and Plain Language*, and *Memoirs of a Superfluous Man*.

During the early 1920s, he became the co-editor of the short-lived magazine, *The Freeman*. The magazine attracted a wide variety of celebrated authors, including Thomas Mann, Bertrand Russell, Lewis Mumford, Louis Untermeyer, Thorstein Veblen, and others. Acerbic and perceptive critic H. L. Mencken wrote of Nock's work for *The Freeman* in glowing terms: "His editorials during the three brief years [actually four] of the *Freeman* set a mark that no other man of his trade has ever quite managed to reach. They were well-

informed and sometimes even learned, but there was never the slightest trace of pedantry in them” (Mencken, 1926, p. 123).

In what follows, I would like to resurrect Nock’s theory of education, and then reduce it to its essentials. It took him a book, albeit a short one, to formulate his theory, and this is only a brief article, so an extended commentary will not be my purpose. One of his books was titled *The Theory of Education in the United States*. It contains a group of lectures he was invited to give at the University of Virginia in 1931, and was published the following year. More than a decade later, in 1943, when Nock by then was in his sixties, he published *Memoirs of a Superfluous Man*; some brief parts of that book resumed his analysis of U.S. education. In what follows are his main observations and claims about this country’s system of education; whenever possible, I’ll let Nock speak directly for himself by liberally quoting brief passages from his now rarely read books.

Education in the Great Tradition

“Education” as Nock understood it is not what we have come to mean by it today. He was, if one accepts his account of American education, one of the last of a generation to benefit from a certain ideal and a system of education that embodied that ideal. Nock called that ideal the Great Tradition, and by this he meant the classical liberal arts tradition which emphasized several special objectives and which made a simple and basic presupposition about the relationship between students and teachers; we’ll discuss these in a moment.

The classical liberal arts tradition has today fallen out of fashion and out of our familiarity; it has become alien to our whole-hearted embrace of utilitarian pursuits, whether it is the acquisition of educational credentials that allow one to obtain a well-paying job, research that culminates in

commercially profitable products or advances in technology, or the production of economically important services. I don't propose to spend time in this essay describing in detail the nature of the classical liberal arts ideal of education.* Suffice it to say here, the classical ideal emphasized an education which allowed the student to cultivate the “liberating, non-servile arts,” the disciplines that permitted his or her mind to develop its critical capacity and that furnished the student's mind with many of the cultural riches that have come down to us during the two and a half millennia since the early Greeks and Romans.

The Great Tradition presupposed a knowledge of classical languages, Greek and Latin, and a familiarity with Greek and Latin literature. The literary, scientific, historical, and philosophical works of the Great Tradition are represented, in part, by the collection, *Great Books of the Western World*, edited by Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler. The liberating arts comprised both the Trivium of grammar, rhetoric, and logic, and the Quadrivium consisting of geometry, arithmetic, music, and astronomy. These disciplines were studied by the students of the Great Tradition, and were learned in a manner that was free of an overriding interest in their utilitarian application in the everyday world. They were not only, as Cicero expressed this, the “*artes quae libero sunt dignae*” — the arts that are worthy of a free man — they were the arts, the ways to devote life, that permitted the individual to *become free*; they comprised the cultural paths to emancipation from mediocre concerns with usefulness and servility; in short, they comprised what the Scholastics identified as “*culture*” (from *cultus*), a word American society now instead uses to mean the patterns of interaction exhibited by sports teams, businesses, kindergartens, and whatever else comes to hand.

* For this, see, e.g., Bartlett (1990, 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 2018).

The objectives that defined education in what Nock called the Great Tradition were, in short, fundamentally different from those inspiring education today.

But, and perhaps more importantly, the classical liberal arts tradition made a simple and radically different assumption about the teacher-student relationship than do our American schools today. The classical tradition presupposed that any student who is *educable* is a person who, *of his or her own accord, seeks to learn* — that is, he or she *must already possess an interest in learning, already possess the motivation to learn, and must take sole responsibility for his or her own learning*. Nock summed up these presuppositions:

[T]he whole burden of [traditional, classical, liberal-arts] education lay on the student, not on the institution or on the individual scholar... [I]t was no part of the [traditional] institution's intention or purpose that [the professor] should transfer any of the actual burden of education from the student's shoulders to his own, or contribute anything from his own fund of interest in his subject by way of making up for any deficiency of interest on the part of the student. (Nock, 1932, p. 73)

The system of education that Nock experienced in his youth was of this sort:

We were made to understand that the burden of education was on us and no one else, least of all on our instructors; they were not there to help us carry it or to praise our efforts, but to see that we shouldered it in proper style and got on with it. (Nock, 1943, p. 77)

Nock observed that, in radical contrast, during the late 1890s, American schools began a complete turn-about, reversing the direction of responsibility between students and teachers:

[O]ur institutions have conducted among themselves a grand competition for numbers, on ruinous terms ... by shifting the burden of education from the student to the instructor, and putting pressure on the instructor to let his students go through as lightly and quickly as possible.... (Nock, 1932, p. 82)

During the 1930s (and continuing to some extent even today) European colleges and universities instead presupposed that responsibility for learning must be situated in the student:

We in the United States hear a great deal about the “average student,” and his capacities, needs and desires. The Continental institution feels under no obligation to regard the average student as a privileged person. He is there on his own, if he be there at all, and he finds nothing cut to his measure, no organised effort to make things easy and pleasant for him, no special consideration for his deficiencies, his infirmity of purpose, or the amount or quality of intellectual effort that he is capable of making. (Nock, 1932, p. 109)

The American embrace of “instruction” and “training”

Education, properly applied to suitable material, produces something in the way of an Emerson; while training, properly applied to suitable material, produces something in the way of an Edison. Suitable material for education is extremely scarce; suitable material for training abounds everywhere. (Nock, 1943, p. 270)

As a result of America’s decision to relieve the student of exclusive self-responsibility for his or her own learning, Nock

claimed that American education was forced to give up the classical ideal of education in the Great Tradition, and instead resort to what he called “instruction” and “training.” Both are fundamentally distinct from what Nock understood by “education”:

Perhaps we are not fully aware of the extent to which instruction and education are accepted as being essentially the same thing. I think you would find, if you looked into it, for instance, that all the formal qualifications for a teacher’s position rest on this understanding. A candidate is certificated — is he not? — merely as having been exposed satisfactorily to a certain kind of instruction for a certain length of time, and therefore he is assumed eligible to a position which we all agree that only an educated person should fill. Yet he may not be at all an educated person, but only an instructed person. We have seen many such, and five minutes’ talk with one of them is quite enough to show that the understanding of instruction as synonymous with education is erroneous. They are by no means the same thing. (Nock, 1932, pp. 6-7)

We gain a sense of what an “educated person” meant to Nock when he wrote:

To bear the degree of Master of Arts is an immense pretension, and *noblesse oblige* — how are [today’s students] justifying it? Are they showing disciplined and experienced minds, are they capable of maintaining a mature and informed disinterestedness, a humane and elevated serenity, in all their views of human life? Do they display invariably the imperial distinction of spirit, the patrician fineness of taste, which we have been taught to associate with that degree of proficiency in the liberal arts? We cannot

see that the kind of discipline to which ... they have been subjected has any such bearing. (Nock, 1932, p. 120)

In Nock's theory of American education, the "average student" is not a very promising candidate for genuine education — that is, of course, "education" according to the classical ideal that Nock endorsed. Indeed, for Nock the "average student" is not promising at all. We shall look at his assessment of the average student in a moment. We've seen that according to him the average student can be "instructed"; he or she can also be "trained"; the two concepts dovetail with one another:

When we consider what [the average fourteen-year-old stage of development] is, we are quite free to say that the vast majority of mankind cannot possibly be educated. They can, however, be trained; anybody can be trained. Practically any kind of mentality is capable of making some kind of response to some kind of training.... If all hands would simply agree to call training education, to regard a trained person as an educated person and a training-school as an educational institution, we need not trouble ourselves about our theory; it was safe. Since everybody is trainable, the equalitarian side of our theory was safe. Since training in anything for anybody is a mere matter of money, equipment, and specific instruction, the democratic side of our theory was safe. (Nock, 1932, p. 59)

The regime perceived that while very few can be educated, every one who is not actually imbecile or idiotic can be trained in one way or another, as soldiers are trained in military routine, or as monkeys are trained to pick fruit. Very well then, it said in effect, let us agree to call training education, convert

our schools, colleges, universities into training-schools as far as need be, but continue to call them educational institutions and to call our general system an educational system. We will insist that the discipline of instrumental studies is as formative as any other, even more so, and to quite as good purpose, in fact much better. We will get up courses in “business administration,” bricklaying, retail shoe-merchandising, and what-not, agree to call our graduates educated men, give them all the old-style academic degrees, dress them out in the old-style gowns and hoods,— and there we are, thoroughly democratic, thoroughly equalitarian, in shape to meet all popular demands. (Nock, 1943, pp. 89-90)

We see immediately in the above passages that Nock saw a cause-and-effect relationship between America’s embrace of democratic and equalitarian values and the country’s embrace of “training” and “instruction,” a consequence of the country’s having abandoned “education.” As we shall see, he did not think this was a good thing — though it may be appropriate for U.S. society.

Democracy and the conviction that everybody is educable, versus education

Nock was a great admirer of Thomas Jefferson, indeed he wrote a long and detailed biography of Jefferson (Nock, 1926), which H. L. Mencken (1926) could not commend more highly. Nock believed that his own assessment of the direction taken by American education was wholly consistent with Jefferson’s thought. Specifically, Nock undertook to show that democracy and equalitarian values, as they are commonly understood, fundamentally conflict with and obstruct education in the Great Tradition.

Our system is based upon the assumption, popularly regarded as implicit in the doctrine of equality, that everybody is educable. This has been taken without question from the beginning: it is taken without question now. The whole structure of our system, the entire arrangement of its mechanics, testifies to this. Even our truant laws testify to it, for they are constructed with exclusive reference to school-age, not to school-ability. When we attempt to run this assumption back to the philosophical doctrine of equality, we cannot do it; it is not there, nothing like it is there. The philosophical doctrine of equality gives no more ground for the assumption that all men are educable than it does for the assumption that all men are six feet tall. (Nock, 1932, pp. 30-31)

He went on to say:

[W]e discovered that relatively very few are educable, very few indeed. There became evident an irreconcilable disagreement between our equalitarian theory and the fact of experience. Our theory assumed that all persons are educable; our practical application of it simply showed that the Creator, in His wisdom and in His loving-kindness, had for some unsearchable reason not quite seen His way to fall in with our theory, for He had not made all persons educable. We found to our discomfiture that the vast majority of mankind have neither the force of intellect to apprehend the processes of education, nor the force of character to make an educational discipline prevail in their lives. (Nock, 1932, p. 55)

Very much unlike American schools, European schools presumed neither equality nor did they hold their students in a warm democratic embrace:

The upshot of the Continental system's freedom from unsound notions about equality and democracy is that its processes are selective; "the best geniuses," as Mr. Jefferson said, are diligently "raked from the rubbish," and the rubbish is not suffered to clog the workings of the system's machinery. Our system, on the contrary, is engaged with the rubbish, because the theory of its operation requires it to be so engaged. (Nock, 1932, p. 110)

Readers unfamiliar with Jefferson's model of education may be shocked by his choice of words, but they are his. Nock summarized Jefferson's recommended system of education:

In outline, Mr. Jefferson's plan was this: Every child in the State should be taught reading, writing and common arithmetic; the old-fashioned primary-school course in the three Rs. Each year the best pupil in each primary school should be sent to the grammar schools, of which there were to be twenty, conveniently located in various parts of the State; they were to be kept there one or two years, and then dismissed, except "the best genius of the whole," who should be continued there for the full term of six years. "But this means," wrote Mr. Jefferson, "twenty of the best geniuses shall be raked from the rubbish annually." ...

Mr. Jefferson's plan appears selective with a vengeance in our eyes, accustomed as they are to the spectacle of immense hordes of inert and ineducable persons slipping effortlessly through our secondary schools, colleges, universities, on ways that seem greased for their especial benefit. (Nock, 1932, pp. 32-33)

— Certainly on the surface, this description of “ineducable persons,” too, involves a very derogatory choice of words. Let us see why Nock chose them.

The “ineducable”

[T]he ineducable are among us as the sands of the sea for multitude. (Nock, 1932, p. 116)

Why should anyone maintain what would surely seem to be such an imprudent, demeaning, and offensive claim? But Nock did not intend to demean or offend, though it may have been imprudent of him to so state his case, especially as he did in the presence of the President of the University of Virginia — incidentally, founded by Thomas Jefferson — when he uttered these and related barbed claims.

To understand Nock’s rationale for what he genuinely thought to be true, we need to understand what he considered to be an “*educable person*.” We already can see that such a person must be self-motivating, a self-initiating learner, a person who is neither dependent upon teachers to instruct or train him or her, and who does not even wish to be in such a relation of dependency. And we already know that, for Nock, an educable person is an individual who is attracted to the cultural rewards that come from a study of the classical liberal arts. — Already, if we were to pour humanity through this demanding filter, we should find comparatively few students with these characteristics caught in it.

But there is more to being an educable person than this:

The educable person, in contrast to the ineducable, is one who gives promise of some day *being able to think*; and the object of educating him, of subjecting him to the Great Tradition’s discipline, is to put him in a way of right thinking, clear thinking, mature and profound thinking. (Nock, 1932, p. 124, italics added)

“*Maturity*” plays a central role in Nock’s “being able to think”: “Maturity,” in his view, means something more than attaining majority or biological adulthood, it means such things as the ability to take control of oneself, to refrain from impulsive thought and behavior, to maintain sustained, undistracted concentration, to approach education and later life with firmness and constancy of purpose, to lead a life that is unswervingly inspired by the values of the Great Tradition, and, in the process, to reach a stage of mental development capable of considered, dispassionate, reflective critical thought. This — unfortunately, as both he and Jefferson observed — can be the case for only a small minority of individuals.

[V]ery few people are educable. The great majority remain, we may say, in respect of mind and spirit, structurally immature; therefore no amount of exposure to the force of any kind of instruction or example can ever determine in them the views of life or establish in them the demands on life, that are characteristic of maturity. (Nock, 1932, p. 58)

How American education went wrong — or did it?

If, in fact, the majority of average American students require a dependent relationship upon their teachers, require instruction and training from their teachers in order to learn, and are fundamentally and irremediably immature, then they are, in Nock’s meaning, “ineducable.” But they are certainly not untrainable and they are not incapable of being instructed. If this describes the majority, as both Nock and Jefferson claimed it did, then what system of education does the majority *require*?

Nock’s “theory of education in the United States,” the title of his little book, leads to the conclusion that the ineducable majority really does need what we today call a

vocationally-oriented system of education. They *require* a system of education intended to instruct and train the majority to fit the non-liberating, servile forms of employment which the majority has, throughout human history, always found its way to. It is a universal system of education that began to be embraced by American schools, according to Nock, about three decades before he gave his lectures at the University of Virginia — in other words, around the end of the 1800s, certainly a long time ago.

By the time Nock wrote his 1932 book, already American education had incorporated the vocational model, and in the process, Nock claimed, those individuals who are capable of becoming genuinely educated persons were pushed aside and neglected; schools whose approach to teaching and whose curricula are designed for the average student cannot respond, he argued, to genuinely educable students who take responsibility for their own learning and who, in order to develop as intellectually and culturally mature people, require an altogether different curriculum that emphasizes the Great Tradition. Nock wrote:

In its great work of training and conditioning the ineducable masses, I thought our system was doing, on the whole, a first-rate job.... As for the educable minority, they were merely *casualties of the time and circumstances into which they were born*, and that was that. The whole course of things seemed to me perfectly logical, orderly, with each step making the next one inevitable in the long sequence of cause and effect.... (Nock, 1943, p. 280, italics added)

Clearly, then, if everybody were motor-minded, ineducable, without hope of development beyond adolescence, [our present American educational system] would be an excellent system indeed.... But if the educable person be admitted to exist among us and to be worth developing; and if it be shown that

our system not only does not, but under its theory cannot, direct and promote his due developing; then, I think, the time that we have devoted to the examination of this theory has not been spent in vain. (Nock, 1932, p. 123)

There is no suitable place for the educable individual in the American system of universal education

In bowing to the needs of the average “ineducable student,” the U.S. system of education, according to Nock, has had to make disastrous compromises. The student who requires external pressures and demands imposed by his or her teachers in order to entice and coerce the student to learn what he or she is being trained to do, the American system of education, in Nock’s view, inevitably gives short shrift to the brightest, the most able, the most educable students. As he colorfully expressed this in his autobiography, Nock commented:

In a society essentially neolithic, as ours unquestionably is at the moment, — whatever one may hold its evolutionary possibilities to be, — there can be no place found for an educable person but such as a trainable person could fill quite as well or even better; he becomes a superfluous man; and the more thoroughly his ability to see things as they are is cultivated, the more his superfluity is enhanced. As the process of general barbarisation goes on, as its speed accelerates, as its calamitous consequences recur with ever-increasing frequency and violence, the educable person can only take shelter against his insensate fellow-beings, as Plato says, like a man crouching behind a wall against a whirlwind. (Nock, 1943, p. 95)

Nock observed what he called a “*resentment of superiority*” that is endemic to current American society and to its educational system. In his view, there has been a “flagrant popular perversion of the doctrines of equality and democracy” which has led to this phenomenon:

[T]he mass-mind is most bitterly resentful of superiority. It will not tolerate the thought of an elite; and under a political system of universal suffrage, the mass-mind is enabled to make its antipathies prevail by sheer force of numbers. Under this system, as John Stuart Mill said, the test of a great mind is its power of agreement with the opinions of small minds; hence the intellectual tone of a society thus hamstrung is inevitably set by such opinions. In the prevalent popular view, therefore, — the view insisted upon and as far as possible enforced by the mass-men whom the masses instinctively cleave to and choose as leaders, — in this view the prime postulate of equality is that in the realm of the spirit as well as of the flesh, everybody is able to enjoy anything that anybody can enjoy; and the prime postulate of democracy is that there shall be nothing for anybody to enjoy that is not open for everybody to enjoy. An equalitarian and democratic regime must by consequence assume, tacitly or avowedly, that everybody is educable. (Nock, 1943, p. 88)

Since Nock claims that by no means is it the case that “everybody is educable,” the genuinely educable student, and certainly the gifted student — who together, relative to the population of average students, comprise an elite group — cannot but be “hamstrung” both by classes designed for the average and by a pace, content, and level of learning that is, by their avowed intent, dedicated, as is said today, “to leaving no child behind.”

Implicit in Nock's many observations about this lowest-common-denominator-system of U.S. education is his wish, indeed a commitment, that the brightest among us, the most well-endowed intellectually, not be *disadvantaged* as a result of an equalitarian system.

However, that wish and commitment cannot, as we shall see in Nock's analysis, be satisfied by a mass-oriented society and educational system that is, by its nature, vocational rather than cultural.

Is there hope for a turn-around in American education?

A few pages back, I quoted a passage from Nock's writing in which he stated:

... if the educable person be admitted to exist among us and to be worth developing; and if it be shown that our system not only does not, but under its theory cannot, direct and promote his due developing; then, I think, the time that we have devoted to the examination of this theory has not been spent in vain. (Nock, 1932, p. 123)

This passage gives the impression that Nock was optimistic that by formulating his observations and publishing them in book form this might lead to some compensatory steps on the part of American education to undo the fact that it has — very literally — turned the classical ideal education *upside-down*. —We might put it this way: What used to be “up” and defined the word ‘higher’ in ‘higher education’, was now put down at the bottom of America's priorities. But, here again, we may be surprised by the conclusion that seemingly hopeful Nock drew.

Things being as they are, one's natural desire is to see what can be done about them. Frankly, I do not see

that anything can be done about them. There is no trouble about seeing what might be done, perhaps what should be done, but what can be done is another matter. (Nock, 1932, p. 142)

Reading Nock's books, the reader is struck by his willingness, despite his very evident idealism about classical education, to accept a pragmatic realism about the prospects for change in the American system of schooling. Like a giant heavy container ship whose momentum makes it impossible to change its course quickly, much less to stop quickly and reverse its course, Nock was aware of the momentum already built into America's choice of educational doctrine and its thoroughgoing implementation from elementary to high school, and from undergraduate college to university. He was also aware of the power of vested interests, and of the disinclination of federal, state, and local governments and school boards to reverse course, even if they are cognizant of shortcomings in the present system.

[I]t seems that dissatisfaction with our system, however acute and widespread, is unlikely to take shape in flat abandonment of our educational theory; and short of that, it would appear that nothing can be done which would go any great way towards mending matters, nothing that would bring out the educable person and set him right with the world. The educational system of Continental countries, like Mr. Jefferson's, tends primarily towards salvaging the educable person, seining him out of the general ruck, and making something of him. It does this easily, naturally, purposefully, because it is not hamstrung by any insane pseudo-equalitarian and pseudo-democratic notions about education; it imports into its practice no such irrelevant nonsense as those notions entail. It is based on the idea that educable persons are relatively few, that their social value is

great, that they are accordingly precious and should be enabled to make the most of themselves. (Nock, 1932, pp. 150-151)

And so his book and his theory of education in the United States concludes with resignation:

I do not think that our American society will ever return to the Great Tradition. I see no reason why it should not go on repeating the experience of other societies, having already gone as far as it has along the road of that experience, and find that when it at last realises the need of transforming itself, it has no longer the power to do so. (Nock, 1932, p. 159)

In his later autobiography, Nock went further in expressing his resignation:

Why ... should a State-controlled system of instruction do more than go through the motions of dealing with an educable minority? I see no reason why it should. It is perfectly logical that it should not; the disparagement of intelligence and wisdom is all in the general “course of rebarbarisation” on which Spencer saw so clearly that Western society had set forth nearly a century ago. It is inevitable, and therefore the part of wisdom is not to resent it or deplore it or think overmuch about it.

At one time I had the notion that our system might do a little better than it was doing by the educable minority. I thought that with all its innumerable training-schools for the ineducable, it might establish two or three modest institutions which should be strictly educational, devoted to cultivating intelligence in those who gave proof of having it, and holding out the attainment of wisdom as an end preeminently desirable for its own sake. The

idea seemed unpretentious enough, and putting it into effect as an experiment would cost relatively little. I went on the assumption that although persons of intelligence and wisdom were no asset to the State, they might be something of an asset to society, and were therefore worth a moderate amount of attention. I had not actually given the matter much thought, however, and as soon as I turned it over in my mind I perceived that it was nothing to be taken seriously; for obviously, whether or not such persons are an asset to society depends altogether on the kind of society you have, on what philosophy governs it, on what it is trying to make of itself, what it is driving at. As soon, then, as I found myself back on the solid ground of reason and logic, I saw that our system was all in the right, and that my notion of the educable minority being a potential social asset was quite wrong. (Nock, 1943, p. 275)

It is rare to find an author who believes, on the one hand, that his work has a value, so that, as he expressed this, “the time that we have devoted to the examination of this theory has not been spent in vain,” and, on the other hand, who cannot, in all realism, foresee the day when American education will have the strength of will, the resources, the political backing, and the public support necessary to accomplish an overhaul of a system of education that has, in one clear sense, gone *wrong* because it disadvantages genuinely educable students, while, in another equally clear sense, that system of education responds *rightly*—very naturally and logically—to the equalitarian demands placed upon it.

We might put the issue in the following terms: American society’s tacit optimistic presumption today is that average students are qualified to attend, and to graduate from, a four-year, or at the very least, a two-year junior college program of study. In considering this presumption, there are two obvious possibilities, depending upon what the actual *substance* of the

college curriculum is to be. On the one hand, if that curriculum is such that its demands presuppose and require educable students, then clearly, according to Nock, this presumption is completely mistaken. On the other hand, the curriculum of colleges and junior colleges can be reduced to a level that meets the mental and emotional qualifications of the average student; this, in fact, is what has been U.S. education has, for all intents and purposes, accomplished.

Rather than accept the first possibility, which Jefferson and Nock did, today's American society has chosen the second. Accordingly, the huge population of average students must be adequately stimulated and led along by their teachers so that they may be encouraged to learn what they must in order to receive adequate training. At the same time, the brightest students, those with the mental and character traits singled out by Nock, must find their own way to a level of education within a system not designed, intended, or appropriate for them.

As an educator and author myself, I find it hard not to agree with Nock's bleak and unhopeful conclusion. We may face one of reality's dilemmas put into words by William of Orange, when in the face of overwhelming odds, he courageously uttered these words: "It is not at all necessary to hope in order to endeavor, nor to succeed in order to persevere." If we choose to press on, we should do this in as enlightened and well-informed state as possible. Let us try to gain some distance from Nock's theory, and look closely at the conflicts between his and Jefferson's ideal model of education, on the one hand, and the American model currently in force, on the other. At the end of our brief analysis, we may yet uncover a few embers of hope.

The dilemma made explicit

On the following two pages, a table summarizes the head-on conflicts between the Nock-Jefferson model of education and America's present model:

THE NOCK- JEFFERSON MODEL

AMERICA'S CURRENT MODEL

The content of education

A classical liberal arts curriculum includes classical languages and literature beginning in elementary and high school, followed by undergraduate college, then leading, for those students who qualify, to advanced study in a single discipline, but within a framework conscious of interdisciplinary integration and bridges among disciplines.

General education is provided in primary and high schools, and is then followed by undergraduate majors in individual disciplines, and then by specialization in graduate school for those students choosing this.

Presuppositions about students and teachers

The majority of children must be “left behind”: the majority of students are “ineducable” in the sense defined by Nock and Jefferson. That is, the average student does not possess the presupposed self-initiated interest, motivation, and capacity to succeed in a liberal arts curriculum, nor does the average student possess the mental and emotional maturity required.

There is no place in higher education for the average student, and hence there should be no expectation that the majority go to college or to the university; instead, the majority are to be directed to vocational schools.

“No child left behind”: The majority of students are assumed to be educable: The average student is presumed capable of succeeding in college- and university-level programs of study, and every management and instructional effort should be made to see that this happens. The differing levels of mental and emotional maturity of students must somehow be coped with but not allowed to impede their progression through school.

American society is justified in expecting the majority of average students to attend college and to succeed there.

<p>The relation between students and their teachers is one of independence: The student is exclusively responsible for his or her interest and motivation to learn, for his or her overall education, and for his or her success in study. The primary responsibility of the teacher is to be a learned individual, highly competent in his or her own field, engaged in advancing the frontiers of his or her discipline.</p>	<p>The relation between students and teachers is one of dependency of students upon their teachers to teach them; the responsibility for the success of students in learning is placed on teachers, whose competence in teaching, and their salaries and promotion, are to be evaluated by the perceived achievement level of their students and their students' graduation rates.</p>
<p>Political assumptions of education</p>	
<p>Democracy and equality of political rights and privileges do not imply that all students are educable, or that they are equal in potential and in their capacities to learn or to succeed in education or in later life.</p>	<p>Democracy and equality mean that everyone is presumptively assumed to be educable and to have equal potential, and therefore should have equal opportunities to learn and to succeed in education and in later life.</p>
<p>It is the political responsibility of government to provide high quality educational environments for its best students, and to provide training and instruction for the majority who require dependent, vocational training.</p>	<p>It is the political responsibility of government to insure that every student can realize his or her potential in an equalitarian system of education. It is not the political responsibility of the government specifically to design, develop, and maintain a level of education appropriate for its elite, most qualified, advanced, or gifted students.</p>

The preceding table shows in concise terms how much the two approaches to education differ, both in their presuppositions and in their expected outcomes. It is not arguable today that the Nock-Jefferson model of education is no longer considered viable, “relevant,” or perhaps even

practicable. Instead, of the few educators who today have even passing familiarity with the Nock-Jefferson model of education, most judge it to be antiquated, outmoded, and — relative to contemporary society’s needs and interests — purely and simply an anachronism.

Our population size has increased to an extent unimaginable — certainly by Jefferson, and probably also by Nock at the time that he wrote his books. The population of the U.S. has nearly tripled since 1930, while the world population over the same period of time has increased from 2 to 7.6 billion. American society’s needs have grown not only quantitatively but also in complexity; we have needs and interests that are new, many of which could not have been anticipated even a few decades ago. Social change, the introduction of new technologies, and global interconnections have come about very rapidly, as have the needs these have brought with them. Those needs are of many kinds, and an important portion of those needs relies heavily upon education.

As a society and as a country, America is becoming increasingly conscious that its ability to educate its population is central to its ability to succeed as a nation. In many ways, American education is widely recognized to have fallen behind in its capacity to “*produce*” graduates who are as well-educated and skilled as those who graduate from schools in other developed countries. Some, still halting, steps are being taken in an attempt to improve American education, improve and raise its educational standards in a way that can become less educationally disadvantaged and more competitive in global terms.

To recognize and to attempt to confront and respond to these larger concerns and needs, as the country is forced to do, is dauntingly challenging, so much so that the degree and complexity of the challenge can distract attention away from the core of Nock’s two-pronged message: U.S. education has failed miserably to maintain its integrity, quality, and capacity to serve the truly educable — but, at the same time, the

present, increasingly vocational system of training responds both logically and naturally to America's insistence upon equalitarianism in a context in which the highest priority is placed on the servile disciplines and on education-for-well-paying jobs. Nock resigned himself both to the resulting loss and to its inevitability given what he perceived as the unstoppable and increasing momentum of a servile vocationally oriented system of education. In the theory of education of the United States that he formulated, American education has therefore very decidedly gone *wrong*, but the direction it has taken is *right* for a society that wholeheartedly embraces a theory of education whose major premise is, so to speak, that "everyone can be six feet tall if he or she wishes."

Is a genuine liberal arts education possible without a knowledge of Latin and Greek, and does it have a place in modern society?

There is an undeniable advantage in being able to read works in the language in which they were written. This is most especially true of poetry, but it is also true of prose, whether fiction or non-fiction. Only a didactic and unbending purist would contend that reading translations into English is necessarily to miss the entire true substance and meaning of the original texts.

Even if we should be willing to countenance the value of a study of classical Latin and Greek sources by means of their translations into English, still there is something important that a student today is likely to miss, and that is the mental discipline that comes about as a result of the formation of skills in grammatical analysis. Classical Latin and Greek are grammatically challenging and their challenge requires of the student's mind a reflective alertness to the structure of language. American students today tend to be sorely lacking even in a rudimentary knowledge of English grammar, while the language has changed in a way that places fewer and fewer demands upon a speaker's reflective linguistic abilities.

We see this in such grammatical simplifications of English that no longer require a speaker to distinguish between the different usages of ‘lie’ and ‘lay’ or of ‘affect’ and ‘effect’; rules governing comparatives and superlatives (e.g., when adjectives or adverbs require ‘-er’ and ‘-est’ rather than ‘more’ and ‘most’) have given way before the desire for reduced mental strain so that ‘more’ and ‘most’ can be applied to them wholesale and indiscriminately; the rule to avoid “split infinitives” elicits blank incomprehension among today’s students; even the agreement of the singular or plural number of a grammatical subject and its associated verb tends now to be a matter of public indifference; today’s unrefined speakers and hearers of English are led to think that words like ‘enervating’, ‘nonplussed’, and ‘restive’ mean the very opposite of what they actually do; while the now-universal habit has been set in place to use verbs as nouns — as in ‘a feel for’, ‘the repeat’, ‘a win’, ‘a reveal’, ‘the revise’, etc. All of these reflect a simpleton’s level of language use that relieves the mind of reflective linguistic decision-making.

Language does certainly change: Sometimes it evolves, and at other times it degenerates. Sometimes language changes in order to accommodate a tacit wish to lighten the cognitive demands its grammar places on speakers and hearers. There is certainly nothing hallowed about knowing when to use ‘lie’ as opposed to ‘lay’, or when and when not to add ‘-er’ or ‘-est’ to an adjective or adverb. However, as these little grammatical shortcuts that decrease mental effort compound in number, the minds of users of the resulting simplified Basic English predictively themselves become more simplified and more basic in their language discrimination skills. Does the erosion of grammatical discrimination skills carry over into other areas? Proponents of classical liberal arts education argue that it does.

Traditional liberal arts study recognized that an ability to read and write classical Latin and Greek was not, in itself, its only value; rather, the mental skills thereby acquired were judged to possess an importance that extends beyond the

languages themselves — to the discriminatory, analytical, and critically reflective powers of students who had mastered sets of rules that challenge their minds and improve the ability of those minds to function in a self-consciously methodical and disciplined fashion. The *particular* rules involved are not the main issue, but the cognitive discipline acquired as a result of mastering *a demanding set of rules*, that *is* fundamental.

The case for genuine liberal arts education can certainly be made without reliance upon a knowledge of classical Latin and Greek. Study of a comparatively grammatically complex modern language such as Russian or German can of course help a student develop a disciplined consciousness of language structure which a knowledge of classical Latin and Greek fostered. However, the case for genuine liberal arts education *cannot* be made without reliance upon subjects which, like Latin and Greek, require the student to raise and to improve his or her level of reflective, discriminatory analysis that contributes fundamentally to the individual's *ability to think well*, a central objective, we recall, that was insisted upon by Nock.

This “ability to think well,” as understood in Nock’s Great Tradition, stands in need of some explanation. After all, we believe that well-trained attorneys “think well,” as we believe well-trained medical diagnosticians do, along with well-trained mathematicians, logicians, and physical scientists. But these well-trained specialists do *not* necessarily think well in the sense Nock and Jefferson appear to have had in mind. Nock did not explain this sense in detail; I think he assumed at the time he wrote that readers would understand without a detailed explanation. But the classical liberal arts tradition has now faded nearly completely from public memory, so let us have a clearer definition of this “ability to think well.”

It is an ability not merely to think logically and rationally, or to follow methodically and accurately the rules of performance, analysis, and research of one’s special profession. It includes these skills, but a good deal more importantly, from the standpoint of the liberal arts, thinking

well means being able to comprehend one's experience, one's work, and one's reasons for living in the way one has chosen, within a broad framework of understanding that enables the individual to situate his or her work and values within the cultural context provided by the development of (at least) Western civilization. The ability to think well means the ability to situate one's thoughts within this broad perspective, to *comprehend* one's own individual efforts, work, and ideas within that broad perspective, and, as a result, to cultivate an integrative outlook that combines critical thinking with a consciousness of the long and rich development of human culture.

Such an ability to think well is today found only among relatively few people. It is an ability that, for most people, is difficult, and, for many, very nearly impossible to understand today in any truly meaningful sense.

Nock and Jefferson had no doubt that the ability to think well in this more inclusive and integrated sense is essential to being a genuinely well-educated person. Chief among the objectives of a liberal education, as they conceived it, is the cultivation of such an ability to think well. The advantage of a liberal education over purely vocational training is that such an education is freed from applied concerns, freed from the interests of practical utility, and therefore provides, at least for a few years in an individual's life, a liberating context and framework in which human cultural achievements can be studied *in and for themselves*, in what some would regard as an artificially insulated ivory tower, isolated from the inevitably narrowing effects of specialized vocational learning. Within that liberating context, dedicated, self-motivated students have the opportunity to develop the particular variety of ability to think well that concerns us.

It would be a mistake of understanding to read Nock or Jefferson as hysterical, blind propounders of a liberal arts curriculum construed to be so rigid that it cannot adapt to changing social needs. A knowledge of classical Latin and Greek convey clear benefits, but such knowledge is not

indispensable to a genuinely liberal education. We recall that among the central objectives of a liberal education are these: to enable a student to develop the critical capacity of his or her mind, to furnish that mind with many of the riches of a long cultural tradition, to provide an environment that respects and advances learning in a manner that fosters in the student reflective self-control, focused concentration, and a commitment to approach education and life after formal education has ended with a constancy of purpose to live a life informed by millennia of cultural development.

Such an education, today, is admittedly very difficult to acquire. It is a kind of education that, as Jefferson and Nock recognized, attracts and can serve comparatively few individuals.

But, in opposition to Nock, it is, in this author's own experience, not an education that is impossible today — only, it has become exceedingly hard to find. Those who wish to find such an education must frequently do so independently of the vocationally-committed and financial-rewards-motivated system of education that has come to dominate the United States. To find such an education is now especially challenging, difficult in practice, and often financially problematic for the student. But finding such a path — often, of necessity, by means of independent study — is not impossible — especially for those who, like Nock, are willing, at least for a period in their lives, to lead “superfluous” lives.

...

My purpose in writing this essay has been to bring into the open the need to question a set of assumptions that the majority of Americans and their educators tend to make, with little critical reflection: These assumptions are made because they are comfortable, or because they align with what we would prefer to believe, or they make us too uncomfortable if we question them, or they have developed such compelling force that we feel we can no longer bring about any truly

fundamental changes because such changes would simply be too difficult to implement, too unmanageable, too expensive, too impractical, etc.

The table of conflicts between the two models of education, shown on the previous pages, clearly exhibits what is meant by a *dilemma*. But, more than this, the conflicts summarized in the table should point to the fact that, at present, we do not have available to us *evidence* sufficient to inform our decision-making when we invest our beliefs and resources in the model of education that America has chosen.

To be specific, we do not at present have evidence — and by this I mean *strong, compelling, empirical evidence* — that the “potential” of all students is, *in any meaningful sense of the word*, “equal,” or that the potential of all students can be adequately supported and fostered by curricula *designed with the average student in view*. Earlier, I quoted Nock when he said “The philosophical doctrine of equality gives no more ground for the assumption that all men are educable than it does for the assumption that all men are six feet tall.” —Certainly we *do* have clear, convincing, empirical evidence that not everyone is six feet tall. Until we actually know — based on rationally, not emotionally, compelling evidence — that everyone has, again in any meaningful sense, *an equal potential and capacity to learn*, we are muddling about in the dark when we design *universal* curricula for education and make choices based on this equalitarian dogma that will affect the success or failure of young people to find the right path to learning that realistically fits their capacities.

Suppose for a moment that we have designed and instituted what we consider to be the right learning environment, methodical, patient instruction, the right kinds of encouragement, external and pleasing stimuli designed to create in all students an interest and motivation in being educated, even when no such interest and motivation existed beforehand. Now, if, in empirical fact, we should find — given these conditions — that *everybody* can graduate from a substantive, meaningful college and university program of no-

nonsense study, then the choice made by American education at least a century ago would of course make reassuringly good sense. Alternatively, we may find, as Jefferson and Nock claimed they had found, that in empirical fact, the majority of average students cannot succeed in these more demanding terms, but must be directed to what is, at base, no more than vocational training. If we wish to make our choices rationally, based on what we know to be true — not on what we *would like to be true* — then we need to answer the fundamental question about *equal potentials* and *learning capacities*.

We also need to answer the basic question whether America's colleges and universities can afford to disregard entering students' vastly differing levels of emotional maturity. I say "emotional" only, and do not include "mental maturity" because it is widely *believed* that mental maturity can be adequately recognized based on a student's test scores and high school grades. This belief Nock and Jefferson would surely urge us to question. But, to turn only to the issue of emotional maturity, this dimension of the individual student must bear considerable weight under the demands and stresses of higher education.

Can we, as with the American equalitarian assumption of the potential and educability of all students, also justifiably assume that differing levels of emotional maturity will — in the haphazard way we now deal with this issue (if we do at all) — eventually "level out," so that we can further assume that our college and university students, by the time they graduate, will somehow through their education grow to be — in some equalitarian sense — "emotionally mature" in the important meaning of this phrase emphasized by Nock (see above, p. 15)?

Beyond these questionable assumptions, we cannot avoid the equally basic question whether it is the students' primary responsibility to learn, or the teacher's primary responsibility to *make sure* that students *do* learn. Without evidence that shows us where the primary responsibility lies, we have no right to place it at present on the shoulders of our students'

teachers. It is an unacceptable burden if it is not justified by what we know to be true, and we have no such knowledge. Perhaps the responsibility must be shared by both students and their teacher-instructors, or perhaps, as Jefferson and Nock claim, it ultimately must be placed on the shoulders and on the mind of the student.

If no evidence to answer these basic questions is possible at present, then in honesty we must face the bare and unsatisfying fact that we are dealing here with the arbitrariness of *ideologies*, of dogmas, rather than truths. For an entire nation's system of education to hinge on an empirically baseless set of mere *ideological dogmas*, would be, and is, quite incredible, and is surely undesirable and unacceptable.

There is, as I began this essay, significant value in questioning assumptions which, as long as they are left unquestioned, confine us within limits of which we often are unconscious. The assumptions we make about education, about students, and about teachers plainly entail consequences. We should not make the logical, theoretical, and empirical mistake of evaluating our present American model of education by looking mainly at its consequences. What must come first is an open-eyed and critical examination of the assumptions that have led to those consequences.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven James Bartlett was born in Mexico City and educated in Mexico, the United States, and France. His undergraduate work was at the University of Santa Clara and at Raymond College, an Oxford-style honors college of the University of the Pacific. He earned his master's degree from the University of California, Santa Barbara; his doctorate from the Université de Paris, where his research was directed by Paul Ricoeur; and he has done post-doctoral study in psychology and psychotherapy. He has been the recipient of many honors, awards, grants, scholarships, and fellowships. His research has been supported under contract or grant by the Alliance Française, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, the Lilly Endowment, the Max-Planck-Gesellschaft, the National Science Foundation, the Rand Corporation, and others.

Bartlett brings to his research and writing an unusual background consisting of training in epistemology, clinical psychology, and pathology. He is the author and editor of more than 20 books and monographs, and numerous papers and research studies in the fields of psychology, epistemology, and philosophy of science. He has served as a professor at Saint Louis University and the University of Florida, and has held research positions at the Max-Planck-Institute in Starnberg, Germany and at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara. He is currently Affiliated Scholar in Psychology and Philosophy at Willamette University and Senior Research Professor at Oregon State University.

Willamette University hosts a website that provides information about the author and his research, and makes available a large number of his publications in free downloadable form:

<http://www.willamette.edu/~sbartlet>.

Other collections of Bartlett's work may be found with the Social Science Research Network (SSRN):

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