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Should Foreign Language Acquisition be Required? 29 December 2016

According to today’s NY Times (29 December 2016), Princeton University is making the learning of a new language a mandatory requirement of its General Education program -- even for those already proficient in a second language. I’m commenting here because I don’t have a Facebook account, which the NY Times requires for commenting on their blog.

In our day, it is an incredible privilege as a US citizen to know a second language if you are not an immigrant or from a recently immigrated family. It is a privilege because foreign languages unlike in almost all other industrialized nations are not required in elementary school, and, increasingly, they are not required even in high school even for those intending to go on to college because even colleges are rapidly dropping the requirement. After all, all one needs to get ahead in the world these days is English because the whole world has committed to English as the lingua franca of research and business. I am among the privileged able to afford two summers at Middlebury College’s Summer German School at the ripe age of 31. I know full well that the costs in time and money make such an experience simply impossible for most Americans.

The combining of privilege with education, not just language acquisition, is perhaps the greatest barrier to learning in the US. It is the privilege who get an education. “Normal folk” go to work after high school so that most of grade-school and secondary education is focused on survival skills for life as a “worker” -- as if workers would not live “richer” lives if they had access and were appropriately encouraged to pursue education beyond the parameters of “work.” As a consequence, we have a multi-tiered culture in which education is viewed with resentment by many and even contempt by those who are financially successful without having a “formal” education. One of the consequences is anger that “workers” get lost in the equation as jobs are replaced by computerize technology and businesses move overseas to find “cheaper” workers. There, of course, should be no surprise here: if the goal of education is financial success, then “rationalization” (a horrible metaphor) of production and seeking cheaper employees is “necessary.” Too bad, for all of us who thought there was always going to be a job for us, who have worked for years for a company only to lose one’s job and benefits just before retirement, or who have invested in a community by home purchases and shopping only to watch the community disintegrate as a major employer in the community has shut down -- for whatever profit reason.

Perhaps there is a clear and unequivocal message here?! There something more important to education than merely preparing one for the work force! What might that “more” be?

It might help us to sort out the issues here if we ask a huge question: What does it mean to be a human being? At the danger of suggesting that humanity is an exception to the natural order, hence, somehow justifying humanity’s unbridled exploitation of natural “resources” and other species, it is, nonetheless, valuable 1) to recognize that humanity is an animal species among all animal species and that the basis for anything that humanity can/might do is our physical bodies but 2) to recognize that humanity possesses some extra-ordinary capacities -- *even before “formal” education begins*. These capacities are universal to all human beings so that they appear to be “ordinary,” but their universality in no way detracts from their “extra-ordinary” status.

First, as an animal species it is to our personal and universal advantage that we understand the physical order of things as radically and exhaustively as is possible. Nothing that we can think or do can occur without a physical body so that understanding what it means to be a human being requires of us to explore and seek predictable explanations of physical events according to universal, physical laws -- even if we are incapable of *either proving or disproving* that those physical laws are in fact universal because we cannot be in all places at all times to determine whether or not they really are universal. However, in order to investigate nature, we already have to possess some extra-ordinary capacities.

Second, an indicator of something extra-ordinary: We are a species with lousy instincts. However, what nature fails us in instincts in comparison to other species, it has made up for by our being the species that can do something incredible: Into the midst of that stimulus/response structure that we share with all sentient beings, we are able to insert *non-natural* symbol systems. In other words, these symbol systems neither arise or are acquired simply by opening one's eyes. As important as sense perception is for us to be able to negotiate a (social) world, not everything that we can do is derived directly from sense perception. For example, we can count objects. However, numbers are not given to us by the mere perception of objects. We have to add a number system to our perception of physical objects. Already Aristotle (some 300 years before the rise of Christianity - I'm writing for a North American context, not embracing the privileging of a particular, historical religion), pointed out that mathematical skill doesn't require "experience" in the way that learning other skills, for example, to use a computer, fly an airplane, or repair the plumbing. One can be incredibly talented as a mathematician as a young child without much experience of the world, whatsoever.

If mathematics is not acquired by experience, it is also, obviously, not an instinctual skill set because, unlike instincts, this mathematical skill is not universally present in every individual. Mathematics is a symbol system that must be acquired through practice. The capacity to learn mathematics is universally present in every individual, but the inclination and dedication to cultivating that mental skill is not universally present in every individual. Even the young mathematical "genius" must work to discover the skill both in terms of its potential and in terms of its value to the young mathematical "genius" sense of self-worth, for, clearly, the child gets positive reinforcement when this non-instinctual skill is manifest -- or when not encouraged, we recognize the incredible loss to the child and to the rest of us that occurs as a consequence of its neglect.

Mathematics is an obvious example of how symbol systems need to be acquired (not instinctually possessed) and how valuable symbol systems are for understanding our world. As far as we know, no other species can cultivate this mathematical potential to the degree that humanity is capable of doing. This acquired skill is one of the best indicators of how important, generally, education is to "being a human being." It is not that one is a human being only when one develops this particular, mathematical skill. Rather, mathematics confronts us with the reality that human beings must acquire symbol systems (of all kinds) that are not given directly and immediately in the phenomena of sense experience if we are to understand and to transform the world in the ways that we are capable of doing.

Mathematics illuminates another important aspect of our capacity to insert symbol systems into the middle of the stimulus/response structure whose structure is shared with other sentient beings: Mathematics allows us (even on occasion, requires) that we deny our senses! There is absolutely no position that one can assume on this earth that will provide by means of sense data alone the "information" that the sun is standing still and that we are moving some 1,000 miles/hr on the surface of a rotating planet. Yet, (almost) every school child has learned to deny her/his sense experience and is convinced that the earth rotates on its axis and moves around the sun along with the other planets of our solar system. As *ordinary* as that judgment is, it is incredibly extra-ordinary. As far as we know, no physical objects or any other sentient species on this planet are able to make this *ordinary* judgment, much less interested in doing so.

Symbol systems are essential to our being able to understand our experience in the world, and they must be acquired by education. They are not given to us by nature/birth. This observation applies to all kinds of skill acquisition that we human beings are able to cultivate. We must apprentice if we are to adequately acquire a skill of any kind: as a line worker on the assembly line, as a dairy farmer, as an IT specialist, etc. One of the litmus tests that each profession uses to identify (and to make fun of) "outsiders" is to demonstrate their ignorance with respect to the a profession by demonstrating their unfamiliarity with the symbol system of the profession. To be sure, the sending of a child to the hardware store to get a left-handed screw-driver is more likely than not merely *meant* to illustrate the child's lack of concrete experience with respect to a skill set. However, the litmus test itself is a matter of symbol system. Yes, the child has not had sufficient concrete experience, but s/he also has not learned the symbol system that is necessary for adequately having the experience. One does not acquire a skill set just by "opening one's eyes." One must also acquire a sophisticated symbol system if one wishes to be more than a "gopher" in a profession.

Although many use their “privileged” symbol system as the justification for their arrogance over those ignorant of the symbol system involved, the fact is that there is no skill set beyond eating, defecation, and sexuality that comes “naturally” -- and even those “skills” benefit tremendously by acquisition of symbol systems appropriate to them.

What does it mean to be a human being? At least a very minimal answer is that it requires a certain kind of physical body *and* (!) the capacity to acquire symbol systems, not just “opening one’s eyes.” We live by education, not by instinct. The combination of these two minimal conditions are what make it possible for human beings to exercise the most extra-ordinary capacity in its arsenal: We can initiate physical events that physical nature on its own could never accomplish. It is only because of this universal capacity that it is possible for us, but, obviously, by no means necessary, for us to do something perhaps even more extra-ordinary: to assume responsibility for our decisions and actions. However, as with the acquisition of symbol systems, the capacity by no means guarantees its application. In short, humanity is capable of being a moral species not because it *must be but because it can be*. If one wishes to be a human being in the fullest sense, then, perhaps we should be encouraging one another to exercise this most extra-ordinary capacity not by wagging a moral finger in one another’s faces but by simply encouraging one another to be “the morally responsible best of which we are capable.” This is a very different notion of what it means to “be one’s best” in US society today. Doing one’s “best” today more likely means being financially successful by ignoring the *necessities of social solidarity and moral responsibility* that comes with the capacity to acquire the skill set to achieve financial success. No one gets rich in a vacuum!

Furthermore, in contrast to another popular conviction, one can appropriately claim that not all values are culturally relative! To be sure, cultural values are by definition relative. However, there are moral principles that rise above culturally, relative values that we all are capable of recognizing and even invoke when we are abhorred by the brutal behavior of others. Cultural norms require moral principles in order for the cultural norms to be “properly” exercised. Everything that the Nazis did was “legal,” but any individual with any degree of respect for the dignity of human beings recognizes that what the Nazis did to Jews, dissidents, Gypsies, Jehovah’s Witnesses, homosexuals, and the physically impaired was immoral. How do we recognize such dignity and identify such moral principles that justify such a conclusion? That requires at least what Immanuel Kant’s symbol system calls the acknowledgment of each individual’s “autonomous freedom” or the ability not only to do things that nature on its own can never accomplish but also to self-legislate a moral principle to govern the exercise of autonomous freedom. In other words, “autonomy” does not mean here “independent of social institutions and authority.” “Autonomy” literally is “auto-nomos,” which in Greek means “to give oneself the law.” Furthermore recognizing the dignity of all and identifying moral principles requires, at least, the three forms of the “categorical imperative” and the three “maxims of the understanding,” which you can read about under the “M-Word” blog at <http://www.criticalidealism.org>.

At stake in the end, though, is the possibility of our “success” at being human that comes with our *precarious position*: We cannot prove (or disprove) the universality of our non-sensuous capacities *either* to do things with intention that nature on its own could never accomplish *or* to assume responsibility for the exercise of this capacity by embracing universal principles. This lack of proof/disproof is the consequence of the fact that moral principles are no more capable of proof/disproof as universal than physical laws are capable of proof/disproof that they are universal. However, if we want to understand nature and ourselves, we have to *assume* that such physical and moral laws do exist. Otherwise, we can give up trying to understand physical events, and we slip down to the status of brute animality blindly pursuing our personal self-interest -- to the extent “universal” only because we say that “everyone does it.” However, we know that we are capable of doing otherwise, and we admire those who have done otherwise. The danger of their example, though, is that they appear to give us permission to do less than they because only the “moral elite” do such things. Such a logic is a logic that encourages us to deny our humanity, and those who encourage us to do so are doing so out of their personal self-interest, not out of an interest in the welfare of humanity as a whole. Why would anyone want to be less than human?

What does this have to do with Princeton’s (or any college’s) insistence that one learn a foreign language even if one already knows a second language? This approach to an answer does not justify the requirement because it will help one’s financial success. This approach to an answer makes two claims: 1) languages of cultural range are the most valuable of symbol systems to acquire because they a) improve our understanding of the world and, hence, enhance the possibility that we will exercise moral principles in our use of those symbol systems; and

because they b) make it possible for us to understand the subtle and not so subtle differences in skill sets across cultural boundaries, which, in turn, encourages understanding and, hence, enhances the possibility that we will exercise moral principles in our use of these symbol systems. At the least, learning languages of cultural range provide valuable practice in acquisition of a symbol system, and the more practice we have at doing so the greater “autonomy” we have as individuals to employ our capacities to re-tool when the skill sets alone fail us in the marketplace: practice makes a master! Not only, according to this take on the human condition, should second languages be required in post-secondary education of all kind, but also second language acquisition should be required in pre-school, grade school, and secondary education. After all, we want our children to be more successful than we are!