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Laura G. Singleton

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MANAGEMENT AS A LIBERAL ART?
EXPLORING THE CONNECTIONS

LAURA G. SINGLETON
Eckerd College
4200 54th Avenue South
Saint Petersburg, FL 33711

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In recent years, the notion of liberal arts education has come under attack in the U.S., particularly from conservative politicians who question the fruitfulness of government spending to support such degrees (Jaschik, 2011). The stakes were raised when then-President Barack Obama, a prominent liberal, commented that “folks can make a lot more, potentially, with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree” (Jaschik, 2014). Education in science, technology, engineering and math (the so-called STEM fields) has become the gold standard, promoted as the route to good-paying jobs, as well as national job creation.

With the liberal arts increasingly devalued as a source of marketable job skills, it comes as somewhat of a surprise that Peter Drucker, a prominent author in the field of management, made repeated assertions that management should be considered a liberal art (Drucker, 1985). Why would Drucker have wanted to tie his area of expertise to one often labeled as impractical? Perhaps because he saw an opportunity for strengthening the credibility and prestige of both fields: In discussing Drucker’s views, Maciariello and Linkletter (2011, p. 92) suggest that education in both liberal arts and management has evolved to a stage where the fields struggle for “social relevance” – the liberal arts due to their perceived lack of practical application, and management education due to its over-emphasis on technical skills, which tends to sever its connection to values essential for its foundation.

Sensitive to the need for management to be ethical as well as effective, Drucker seemed to aim at reestablishing that foundation. As Maciariello and Linkletter (2011) argue: “If the historical purpose of the liberal arts has been to develop the human capacity to recognize the right and good, management’s only hope to be a moral force for right and good is to ally itself with the liberal arts” (pp. 392-393).

Drucker's definition of a "liberal art" and its connection to management remained elusive, however, as even Maciariello and Linkletter (2011) admit. For example, while asserting that management both is a liberal art and depends on them, he wrote that "we do not know yet precisely how to link" the two (Drucker, 1988, p. 4).

To investigate the basis for Drucker's assertion, this paper will compare his ideas with definitions of liberal arts education propounded by John Newman in the 19th century and, more than a century later, by political scientist Martha Nussbaum, one of the most noted defenders of liberal arts education in the recent controversies.

Further, to connect management practice with these notions of the liberal arts, I will draw on examples from the speeches and writings of C. William Pollard, retired CEO and Chairman of Servicemaster. Founded and led for decades by committed Christians, Servicemaster was noted for corporate policies inspired by a commitment to "Honor God in all we do" (Pollard, 2009, p. 18). Pollard, who led Servicemaster from 1983 to 2002, developed both a personal and professional connection with Drucker, and became himself a proponent of the notion of management as a liberal art (Pollard, 2007). After Drucker's death, Pollard consulted with Maciariello and supported his work to consolidate Drucker's ideas on this subject into articles and a book (Maciariello & Linkletter, 2011; Pollard & Maciariello, 2009).

After comparing Drucker's ideas and management practices at Servicemaster with contemporary notions of the liberal arts, I will highlight ongoing challenges in making the connection Drucker envisioned.

Definitions of the liberal arts

As part of his classic essay regarding "The Idea of a University," 19th-century Catholic thinker John Newman attempted to define the meaning of "liberal" education, as is typically

associated with the liberal arts. Newman initially contrasted “liberal” with “servile,” noting that “servile work” involves “bodily labour, mechanical employments, and the like, in which the mind has no part,” whereas “liberal education and liberal pursuits are exercises of mind, of reason, of reflection” (Newman, 1948, pp. 14-15). By this definition of being a mental activity, drawing on reason and reflection, the practice of management might indeed conform to Newman’s definition of a “liberal pursuit,” as when a manager deliberates over essentials of the job, how to motivate a worker, or what task needs to take priority.

Newman did not stop here, however, with his definition, arguing that some mental activities are not “liberal.” He particularly noted: “[W]hat is merely professional, though highly intellectual, nay, though liberal in comparison of trade and manual labour, is not simply called liberal, and mercantile occupations are not liberal at all” (Newman, 1948, pp. 15-16). His conclusion? “That alone is liberal knowledge which stands on its own pretensions, which is independent of sequel, expects no complement, refuses to be *informed* (as it is called) by any end, or absorbed into any art, in order duly to present itself to our contemplation” (p. 16 – emphasis in original). In other words, the test of “liberal knowledge” is that it has value purely for its own sake. Further, he quotes Aristotle’s summary, contrasting “liberal” possessions with “useful” ones, where the former are only meant for enjoyment and “nothing accrues of consequence beyond the using” (Newman, 1948, p. 17).

It seems impossible for the practice of management to satisfy such a bar – knowledge pursued purely for its own sake and for no end beyond itself. While maintaining throughout that liberal education is not distinctively “professional,” however, Newman ultimately does claim it is useful: “not useful in any low, mechanical, mercantile sense, but as a diffusing good, or as a blessing, or a gift, or power, or a treasure, first to the owner, then through him to the world. I say

then, if a liberal education be good, it must necessarily be useful too” (Newman, 1948, p. 64). Bearing in mind that, for Drucker, “management” was by no means exclusive to the business arena but essential in the successful operation of organizations of all kinds (Drucker, 1988), the notion of liberal education being something applicable by the owner for the good of others offers perhaps the best possibility for harmonizing Newman’s ideas with Drucker’s.

A speech by Pollard, reflecting his thinking on Drucker’s concept, presented a definition of management that similarly aligns with the idea of it being knowledge applied for the good of others: “Management involves the understanding of how one acquires and uses knowledge and how one learns and develops wisdom and judgment. It is an art, as it involves the practice and application of these insights in the understanding of human behavior in accomplishing an organized and group effort” (Pollard, 2007, p. 2).

By the end of the 20th century, in fact, the purist conception of liberal arts education as delivering no other value beyond the knowledge itself would have largely confirmed the perceptions of its critics. As a result, defenders of the value of liberal arts education instead emphasized its usefulness. Martha Nussbaum, while protesting the preeminence of economic aims in education, made a passionate case for the importance of the liberal arts in providing a foundation for citizens to be effective participants in democratic governance. The set of three necessary abilities for this, which she enumerated as being “associated with the humanities and the arts,” were critical thinking, a “citizen of the world” mentality that transcends local loyalties, and the “narrative imagination,” further defined as an ability to “imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person” (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 7). These core abilities offer a useful framework for considering connections between the liberal arts and management.

Liberal arts capabilities in management

The qualities that Nussbaum identified as important for effective citizenship correspond to abilities Drucker likewise saw as necessary for managers. In one of his earliest works, *The Concept of the Corporation*, for example, he wrote: “[T]he isolated executive has no means of understanding why the outside world acts nor of foretelling how it will act. Surveys, straw votes and other techniques are not the answer; for what is needed is not ‘facts’ but an ability to see the facts as others see them” (Drucker, 1946, p. 90). This sounds quite a bit like Nussbaum’s definition of “narrative imagination”: “the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself” (Nussbaum, 2010, pp. 95-96).

From Pollard’s speeches and writings about ServiceMaster, other comparisons to Nussbaum emerge. Pollard often described his early days at the firm, when he, though hired with an expectation of joining the senior executive staff, found out that his first job assignment would be to work on the housekeeping team of a local hospital for eight weeks. He learned firsthand the experience of workers in routine, low-status jobs—how they may be invisible to and disregarded by others, but also how critical their contributions were to the company’s success. This training process for managers in ServiceMaster was reinforced annually, with all company leaders spending at least one day a year in a customer-facing service role.

The practices echo recommendations of Nussbaum, who suggests that one goal of education should be to “teach that weakness is not shameful and the need for others not unmanly” (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 45). During his days mopping floors, Pollard recalled, “I learned the reality of my dependence upon and responsibility to the people I would lead” (Pollard, 2014, p. 94). The connection with frontline workers fostered an ability to identify with them and the lives they led, very much consistent with a “narrative imagination,” which stuck with Pollard

throughout his days as CEO. He noted that “the faces of our service workers would often flash across my mind as I dealt with those inevitable judgment calls between the right and wrongs of running a business. The integrity of my actions had to pass their scrutiny” (Pollard, 2009, p. 94).

The ‘servant leadership’ ethic emphasized at Servicemaster reinforced this identification. As Pollard put it, “[I]t means that the leaders of our firm should never ask anyone to do anything they are unwilling to do themselves” (Pollard, 2009, p. 130). In his writings, he admits that this principle was an area where he himself was continually learning. He mentions one example where Drucker himself challenged Pollard to “eat some humble pie” and take the initiative to reach out and reconcile with a Japanese business partner by whom he had felt slighted. Pollard recalls, “The lesson was clear: my leadership responsibility was not about me or my feelings. It was about what should be done for our business and for our people” (Pollard, 2014, p. 132).

This incident in Japan gives at least some hint of the development of another of the capabilities associated by Nussbaum with the liberal arts, which is the mindset of a “citizen of the world,” having a concern for others that spans beyond one’s own group or nation. Drucker, for his part, stressed how familiarity with Japanese culture and history enabled him to relate effectively in sharing management concepts with Japanese business leaders (Drucker, 1985).

Another emphasis of Nussbaum’s is the value of the liberal arts to “vigorously promote critical thinking – the skill and courage it requires to raise a dissenting voice” (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 46). Even she acknowledges that such abilities are valuable in businesses for supporting potential innovations. An example Pollard provides from ServiceMaster was the company’s expansion from cleaning services for healthcare institutions to contracts with school systems—a proposal championed by regional management who had to buck the initial resistance Pollard and other top managers gave to the idea. Pollard (2009) wrote, “[T]hey had grown up in an

environment that encouraged them to continue to press their ideas and not give up on the process of selling their bosses on something the customer needed” (p. 89). The regional manager ultimately won approval from corporate by staking his annual salary on his ability to get four profitable school contracts up and running within the year. The risk paid off for both him and ServiceMaster in opening up a major line of growing business for the company.

Common aims, but differing foundations?

Just as many of Nussbaum’s core abilities deriving from the liberal arts correspond with examples from Pollard and Drucker, the aims she articulates have much in common with theirs. Through overemphasizing economic advancement as the sole objective of education, Nussbaum (2010) complained that “we seem to be forgetting about ... what it is to approach another person as a soul, rather than as a mere useful instrument or an obstacle to one’s own plans” (p. 6).

Likewise Pollard, writing of Drucker’s views, emphasized that “management as a liberal art...includes the recognition that humanity cannot be defined solely by its physical or rational nature, but also has a spiritual dimension,” with a core value of “treating people as the subject of work, not the object of work” (Pollard, 2014, pp. 100-101).

For Nussbaum (2010), a healthy democracy will have citizens that treat one another “with respect, as ends, not just as tools to be manipulated for one’s own profit” (p. 25). This notion that people are “ends, never means” resonated directly with ServiceMaster’s core objectives. The fourth objective, “To grow profitably,” was always presented as a “means” goal, pursued for the sake of accomplishing the first two “end” objectives, which were “To honor God in all we do,” and “To help people develop” (Pollard, 2009, pp. 18-19). People came first, and were to be enabled to grow and develop by the benefits provided by profits.

Although there is clear agreement between Nussbaum and the proponents of management as a liberal art on the importance of recognizing humans as having inherent dignity and worth, establishing a common foundation for that belief is more difficult. Immediately after her plea to remember to recognize other people as “souls,” Nussbaum (2010) retreats from any particular definition for that word: “The word ‘soul’ has religious connotations for many people, and I neither insist on these nor reject them. Each person may hear them or ignore them” (p. 6).

Nussbaum’s equivocation regarding the “religious connotations” of “soul” reflects the instinctive resistance among modern academics to assert as definitive any truths not attributable to a secularized and value-neutral scientific method. Over the late 19th and early 20th centuries, this view came to dominate and shape U.S. higher education. As Reuben (1996) has documented, controversies regarding the proper place of values in college curricula gradually marginalized moral formation as an institutional goal, fracturing the ancient triadic pursuit of “the good, the true and the beautiful.” Scientific perspectives defined the “true,” and the domain of the humanities and liberal arts represented the “beautiful.” To the extent the liberal arts presented any notion of morality or good, its basis was that of aesthetic or emotional appeal rather than “the cognitive authority of knowledge” (Reuben, 1996, p. 229).

This trend was paralleled by the contemporary development of graduate schools of business and management in the U.S., as discussed by Khurana (2007). To be established as a field of knowledge proper to the emerging paradigm of the research university, M.B.A. programs had to borrow credibility from established social science fields, hiring faculty with doctorates in economics, psychology or sociology.

Drucker spoke out against this approach to management education, arguing that “*professional* schools are not, and must not be, academically ‘respectable.’ Their task is not

‘scholarship;’ it is the leadership of the profession” (Drucker, 1985, pp. 30 - emphasis in original). He resisted the positioning of management as a “science,” most commonly terming it a “practice.” More than that, though, he insisted on its encompassing more than the craft-oriented *techné* knowledge defined by Aristotle: “It cannot be solely concerned with results and performance...[B]ecause the object of management is a human community held together by the work bond for a common purpose, management always deals with the Nature of Man, and...with Good and Evil as well” (Drucker, 1988, p. 5).

Drucker likewise chastised the evolution of the liberal arts under the research university paradigm. He decried the dominance of “obscurantism”—his assessment of movements like deconstructionism and the ever-expanding array of identity-based studies—in liberal arts scholarship. Instead, he aimed “to call the liberal arts back to setting example, to demonstrate and embody values, to create vision, to recall them to their responsibility to lead” (Drucker, 1994, p. 63).

Clearly, Drucker’s identification of management as a liberal art did not reflect a desire to align it with contemporary notions of the liberal arts. Instead, he hoped for a re-conception of the liberal arts as a field aimed at advancing societal good, closer perhaps to Newman’s vision of liberal education “as a diffusing good, or as a blessing, or a gift, or power, or a treasure, first to the owner, then through him to the world” (Newman, 1948, p. 64). Leadership for societal benefit seemed to be Drucker’s ideal objective for the liberal arts, which helps explain why he saw its intrinsic connection with management.

For her part, Nussbaum approaches Drucker’s ideal of creating a vision for societal leadership with her defense of education in the liberal arts. While backing away from religious meanings of the word “soul,” she does “insist on” a definition that encompasses “the faculties of

thought and imagination that make us human and make our relationships rich human relationships rather than relationships of mere use and manipulation” (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 6). In retaining even the claim that there exist explicit, non-physical qualities “that make us human,” however, Nussbaum steps outside the realm of naturalistic knowledge, leaving open the question as to where this claim originates, if not from religious belief.

For Nussbaum, education in the liberal arts (as opposed to an exclusive focus on career-building and profit-making) is key to developing the right vision of humanity: “It is easier to treat people as objects to be manipulated if you have never learned any other way to see them” (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 23). In deemphasizing the need for explicit religious views, however, she sidesteps the possibility that a Judeo-Christian foundation for values, as shared by leaders of ServiceMaster, is also a way of learning this view of humanity. A long-time business educator, Lloyd Sandelands, has argued it is the best, or even only, path: “[T]o account for the spiritual dimension of our human being we must go beyond a scientific vision of matter and nature to a metaphysical vision of our being in God” (Sandelands, 2015, p. 605).

Drucker, according to Pollard (2014), “recognized that this concept of management as a liberal art and its focus on the nature of the human condition, including its spiritual dimension as a source of character development, raised the question of God,” though he likewise felt that respecting cultural differences and individual freedom of conscience meant “it could not demand a uniform response” (p. 254-5). For his own part, Drucker rejected the suggestion that his intellectual roots could be traced to Max Weber, an iconic proponent of value-free science (Weber, 1958), citing instead the influence of Christian existential philosopher Søren Kierkegaard on his thinking (Drucker, 1985).

Conclusion: A problematic reconciliation

From this exploration, the issues in reconciling management with the liberal arts do seem to be a dilemma of means and ends, although not the one that Nussbaum might expect. For thinkers like Drucker and Pollard, people, not profits, must be the end of management. They share the overall goal that Nussbaum herself articulates of contributing to the formation of a society that respects and values human dignity.

The means to that formation, however, arises for both Drucker and Pollard out of a foundation of monotheistic belief – human dignity derives from a purpose and spiritual reality that is beyond the ability of unaided human reason to construct. Nussbaum, however, rejects the notion of any specific foundation of belief, even as she insists upon specifying distinctive traits that “make us human.”

As highlighted by Reuben (1996), relying on the arts and humanities to convey values leaves little more than our emotional or aesthetic response to go on when judging the rightness of our actions. Aesthetic sensibilities change with cultures, leaving values to change with them, and exposing the vulnerable to the powerful along the way. C.S. Lewis put it emphatically: “A dogmatic belief in objective value is necessary to the very idea of a rule which is not tyranny or an obedience which is not slavery” (Lewis, 2001 [1944], p. 73). Drucker and Pollard argued their position on management as a liberal art from a foundation that rested on objective values, while the posture of contemporary academia leaves no room for objective truth outside of naturalistic science.

Pope Benedict XVI (2009) wrote: “*A humanism which excludes God is an inhuman humanism. Only a humanism open to the Absolute can guide us in the promotion and building of forms of social and civic life — structures, institutions, culture and *ethos* — without exposing us*

to the risk of becoming ensnared by the fashions of the moment” (Section 78). Perhaps it is not a coincidence that the vision of the liberal arts developed by Catholic thinker John Newman—that of an education that will be used by the bearer to bless others—shows significant harmony with Drucker’s ideals.

In a concluding summary of Drucker’s thinking about management as a liberal art, Maciariello and Linkletter (2011) query, “Can the world of work and profits concern itself with such lofty ideals as character, integrity, and truth?” (p. 394). A more pertinent question may be, can today’s liberal arts educators? Drucker’s hopes for the field of management certainly have merit, but they require as significant a revision to conceptions of the liberal arts as they do for those regarding management.

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