Introduction

EDUCATION

Modern societies are collectively deeply committed to education, and have in place the mechanisms needed to teach every conceivable profession and to cover every topic of inquiry. We reliably educate pilots and neurosurgeons, actuaries and dental hygienists; we offer lessons in the irregularities of the French pluperfect and textbooks on the conductive properties of metal alloys. We are not individually much cleverer than the average animal, a heron or a mole, but the knack of our species lies in our capacity to transmit our accumulated knowledge down the generations. The slowest among us can, in a few hours, pick up ideas that took a few rare geniuses a lifetime to acquire.

Yet what is distinctive is just how selective we are about the topics we deem it possible to educate ourselves in. Our energies are overwhelmingly directed towards material, scientific and technical subjects – and away from psychological and emotional ones. Much anxiety surrounds the question of how good the next generation will be at maths; very little around their abilities at marriage or kindness. We devote inordinate hours to learning about tectonic plates and cloud formations, and relatively few fathoming shame and rage.

The assumption is that emotional insight might be either unnecessary or in essence unteachable, lying beyond reason or method, an un reproducible phenomenon best abandoned to individual instinct and intuition. We are left to find our own path around our unfeasibly complicated minds – a move as striking (and as wise) as suggesting that each generation should rediscover the laws of physics by themselves.

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ROMANTICISM

That we think so well of untrained intuition is because (perhaps without realizing it) we are the troubled inheritors of what can be defined as a Romantic view of emotions. Starting in Europe in the eighteenth century and spreading widely and powerfully ever since, Romanticism has been deeply committed to casting doubt on the need to apply reason to emotional life, preferring to let spontaneous feelings play an unhampered role instead.

In our choice of who to marry, Romanticism has counselled that we be guided by immediate attraction. In our working lives, we are prompted to choose our jobs by listening to our hearts. We are, above all else, urged never to think too much — lest cold reason overwhelm the wisdom of feeling.

The results of a Romantic philosophy are everywhere to see: exponential progress in the material and technological fields combined with perplexing stasis in the psychological one. We are as clever with our machines and technologies as we are simple-minded in the management of our emotions. We are, in terms of wisdom, little more advanced than the ancient Sumerians or the Picts. We have the technology of an advanced civilization balancing precariously on an emotional base that has not developed much since we dwelt in caves. We have the appetites and destructive furies of primitive primates who have come into possession of thermonuclear warheads.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Emotional intelligence remains a peculiar-sounding term, because we are wedded to thinking of intelligence as a unitary capacity, rather than what it actually is: a catch-all word for what is in fact a range of skills directed at a number of different challenges. There is mathematical intelligence and culinary intelligence, intelligence around literature and intelligence towards animals. What is certain is that there is no such thing as an intelligent person per se — and probably no entirely dumb one either. We are all astonishingly capable of messing up our lives, whatever the prestige of our university degrees, and are never beyond making a sincere contribution, however unorthodox our qualifications.

When we speak of emotional intelligence, we are alluding — in a humanistic rather than scientific way — to whether someone understands key components of emotional functioning. We are referring to their ability to introspect and communicate, to read the moods of others, to relate with patience, charity and imagination to the less edifying moments of those around them. The emotionally intelligent person knows that love is a skill, not a feeling, and will require trust vulnerability, generosity, humour, sexual understanding and selective resignation. The emotionally intelligent person awards themselves the time to determine what gives their working lives meaning and has the confidence and tenacity to try to find an accommodation between their inner priorities and the demands of the world. The emotionally intelligent person knows how to hope and be grateful, while remaining steadfast before the essentially tragic structure of existence. The emotionally intelligent person knows that they will only ever be mentally healthy in a few areas and at certain moments, but is committed to fathoming their inadequacies and warning others of them in good time, with apology and charm.

Sustained shortfalls in emotional intelligence are, sadly, no minor matter. There are few catastrophes, in our own lives or in those of nations, that do not ultimately have their origins in emotional ignorance.

SECULARIZATION

For most of human history, emotional intelligence was — broadly — in the hands of religions. It was they that talked with greatest authority
about ethics, meaning, community and purpose. It was they that
offered to instruct us in how to live, love and die well. Religions were
natural points of reference at times of personal crisis; in agony, one
generally called first for the priest.

When belief went into decline in north-western Europe in the
middle of the nineteenth century, many commentators wondered
where humanity would—in an increasingly secular future—find the
guidance that religions had once provided. Where would ethical
counsel come from? How would self-understanding be achieved?
What would determine our sense of purpose? To whom would we
turn in despair?

One answer—hesitantly and then increasingly boldly articulated—
came to the fore: culture. Culture could replace scripture. There was,
it was proposed, a convincing set of substitutes for the teachings of
the faiths within the canon of culture. The plays of Sophocles and
Racine, the paintings of Botticelli and Rembrandt, the literature of
Goethe and Baudelaire, the philosophy of Plato and Schopenhauer,
the musical compositions of Liszt and Wagner: these would provide
the raw material from which an adequate replacement for the guid-
ance and consolation of the faiths could be formulated.

With this idea in mind, an unparalleled investment in culture
followed in many ever-less faithful nations. Vast numbers of librar-
ies, concert halls, university humanities departments and museums
were constructed around the world with the conscious intention of
filling the chasm left by religion.

Lest we miss the point, in 1854 the designers of the British Muse-
um’s new Reading Room specified that its vast central dome should
have precisely the same circumference as St Peter’s in Rome.

When commissioning its new national museum in the 1870s, the
Netherlands entrusted the task to the foremost church architect of
the day, Pierre Cuypers, whose Rijksmuseum was indistinguishable
from a place of worship. Museums were—as the rallying cry put it—to be our new cathedrals.

That culture might replace scripture remains a theoretically