The School of Life

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An Emotional Education

By Alain de Botton
and The School of Life

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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 enquiry. 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 it 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 unreproducible 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.

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 whom 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 life 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.

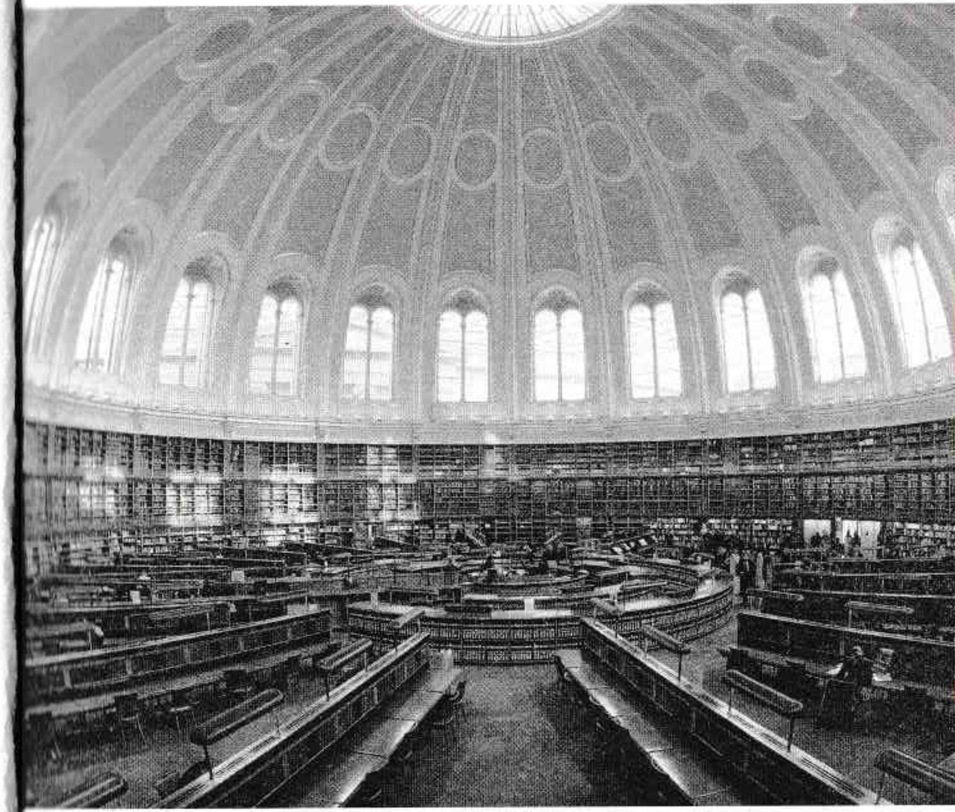
When belief went into decline in north-western Europe in the middle of the nineteenth century, many commentators wondered where humanity would – in an increasingly secular future – find the guidance that religions had once provided. Where would ethical counsel come from? How would self-understanding 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 guidance and consolation of the faiths could be formulated.

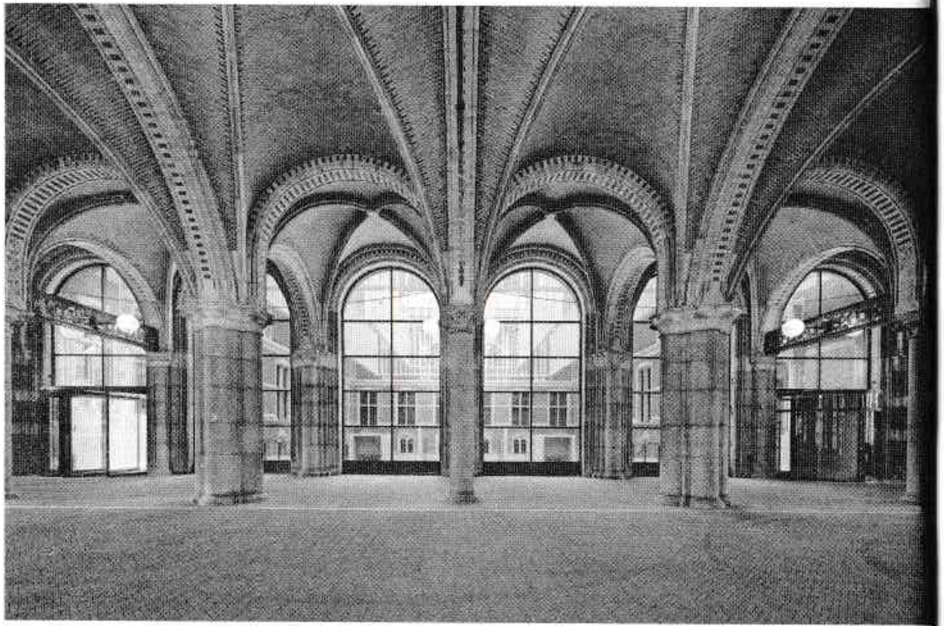
With this idea in mind, an unparalleled investment in culture followed in many ever-less faithful nations. Vast numbers of libraries, concert halls, university humanities departments and museums were constructed around the world with the conscious intention of filling the chasm left by religion.

Lest we miss the point, in 1854 the designers of the British Museum'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 crying put it – to be our new cathedrals.



Culture will replace scripture:
the Reading Room at the British Museum, 1854.



Cathedrals of secularism: the Rijksmuseum, 1885.

That culture might replace scripture remains a theoretically intriguing and emotionally deeply compelling concept. And yet it has, to all intents and purposes, been entirely ignored. Culture has *not* in any way replaced scripture. Our museums are not our new cathedrals. They are smart filing cabinets for the art of the past. Our libraries are not our homes for the soul. They are architectural encyclopedias. And if we were to show up at any university humanities department in urgent search of purpose and meaning, or were to break down in a museum gallery in a quest for forgiveness or charity, we would be swiftly removed and possibly handed over to psychiatric authorities. The intensity of need and the emotional craving that religions once willingly engaged with have not been thought acceptable within the contemporary cultural realm. The implication is that any moderately educated and sensible person already knows how to manage the business of living and dying well enough – without the need for a nanny.

Those who have produced culture may have sought to transform and inspire us; those who guard and interpret it have restricted themselves to a sober and curatorial interpretation of its function.

No wonder we might still be casting around for ways to arrange our minds in the wake of religion's ebb.

SELF-HELP

It is notable that, within the upper echelons of culture, there is no genre more maligned or discredited than self-help. The entire self-help category has become synonymous with sentimentality, idiocy and hucksterism.

To go by many of its examples, this caustic verdict is not especially unfair. The book covers are frequently garish and the promises overblown. But to dismiss the idea that underpins self-help – that one might at points stand in urgent need of solace and emotional education – seems an austerely perverse prejudice.

Ancient Greek and Roman culture recognized and honoured our needs with greater dignity. The noblest minds – Aristotle, Epicurus, Cicero, Seneca and Marcus Aurelius – all turned their hands to what were unmistakably works of self-help. The applied philosophical tradition in which they operated continued beyond the fall of Rome. Michel de Montaigne's *Essays* (1580) amounted to a practical compendium of advice on helping us to know our fickle minds, find purpose, connect meaningfully with others and achieve intervals of composure and acceptance. Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913) was, with equally practical ambition, a self-help book intent on delineating the most sincere and intelligent way that we might stop squandering and start to appreciate our too brief lives.

The problem should not, therefore, be assumed to lie with the idea of self-help per se, only with the manner in which the genre has, in modern times, been interpreted and explored. In reality, there could be few more serious tasks for any literary work than guiding and consoling us and weakening the hold that confusion and error have on us.

Progress towards a better kind of self-help depends on reviewing the potential of a widely debased genre, and in keeping faith with the essential seriousness of the project of emotional education.

SELF-DEVELOPMENT

As children, when someone asked our age, we might have said, 'I'm four', and added, with great solemnity, 'and a half'. We didn't want anyone to think we were only four. We had travelled so far in those few months, but then again we were modest enough to sense that the huge dignity of turning five was still quite far away. In other words, as children, we were hugely conscious of the rapidity and intensity of human development and wanted clearly to signal to others and ourselves what dramatic metamorphoses we might undergo in the course of our ordinary days and nights.

It would nowadays sound comic or a touch mad for an adult to say proudly, 'I'm twenty-five and a half' or 'forty-one and three-quarters' – because, without particularly noticing, we've drifted away from the notion that adults, too, are capable of evolutions.

Once we're past eighteen or so, our progress is still monitored but it is envisaged in different terms: it is cast in the language of material and professional advancement. The focus is on what grades have been achieved, what career has been chosen and what progress has been made in the corporate hierarchy. Development becomes largely synonymous with promotion.

But emotional growth still continues. There won't be a simple outward measure: we're no taller, we've not boosted our seniority at work and we've received no new title to confirm our matriculation to the world. Yet there have been changes nevertheless. We may, over two sleepless nights, have entirely rethought our attitude to envy or come to an important insight about the way we behave when someone compliments us. We may have made a momentous step in self-forgiveness or resolved one of the riddles of a romantic relationship.

These quiet but very real milestones don't get marked. We're not given a cake or a present to mark the moment of growth. We're not congratulated by others or viewed with enhanced respect. No one cares or even knows how caring might work. But inside, privately, we might harbour a muffled hope that some of our evolutions will be properly prized.

In an ideal world, we might have in our possession maps of emotional progress against which we could plot our faltering advance towards more sustained maturity. We might conceive of our inner developments as trips around a region, each one with distinct landmarks and staging posts, and as significant in their way as the cities of Renaissance Italy or the beauty spots on the Pacific Highway – and which we might be equally proud to have reached and come to understand our way around.