

The problem of intellectual knowledge in female education

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Takahashi Fumi (1901–1945) was a philosopher and educator, although she is best known for being the niece of the famous philosopher Nishida Kitarō and for being one of the first women in Japan to pursue philosophy professionally. She graduated from Tohoku Imperial University in 1929, the only woman in her class of five philosophy and ethics students. Her thesis focused on the philosophy of Plato.

The text reproduced here is a talk Takahashi gave on the radio on January 8, 1936.

In recent times, there has been a general trend in education that emphasizes and promotes the importance of manual education [劳作教育],² which is something to be welcomed in view of the excessive emphasis that has been placed on so-called intellectual education until now.

However, the promotion and implementation of manual education is only half the picture, as one might ask whether this devalues or discourages intellectual education. This is especially true in the context of general education for women, which is thought to differ completely in its aims from the education of men. Combined with the wave of a reactionary era, intellectual education is further reduced, and is there not a tendency to despise it? At this point, I think

¹ I would like to thank Megumi Takase for their useful suggestions and corrections regarding the translation.

² It seems that Takahashi is referring to the German idea of *Arbeitspädagogik*, popular at the beginning of the 20th century.

it is not entirely useless to try to think about what meaning intellectual education should have in women's education.

First, to think about the problem more simply, let us compare this between middle schools for boys and girls. In middle schools for boys, there is indeed what could be described as an excessive emphasis on intellectual education. The harmful effects of this have been discussed today, and there are numerous points that need to be thought through in detail by experts in the time to come. However, in the same vein, if we also talk about the negative effects of the emphasis on intellectual education in Higher Girls' Schools [高等女学校], it could be considered extremely pointless. To put it bluntly, it would be like saying that both amoebas and humans are animals. As proof, if we look at the materials in the Ministry of Education-approved textbooks, this difference becomes extreme. As those involved in girls' education also perceive, the textbooks used in higher girls' education, in any science school textbook, are of a much lower and more rudimentary level when compared to those used in middle school [中学].³

This difference is particularly extreme in scientific knowledge, although it cuts across all subjects, from the teaching of the national language to textbooks on humanities subjects such as history and geography, to questions of the foundations of scientific knowledge, such as botany, zoology, and physics. Furthermore, when it comes to foreign language teaching, with the exception of special compilations in a very small number of girls' schools run by foreigners, the difference is extreme. This difference in textbooks also translates into a difference in timetables. In girls' high schools, within a total number of hours almost equal to that of middle schools, most of the time is consumed by subjects such as cooking, sewing, home economics, and etiquette, and this tends to increase in the upper grades. However, while this is debatable in middle school, in the upper grades, intellectual subjects increase and, even more so, the level

³ Here, Takahashi refers to higher girls' schools [高等女学校] and "middle school" [中学]. Chūgakkō (secondary school for boys) and Kōtō Jogakkō (secondary school for girls) were not simply two institutions for different sexes; they represented, as Takahashi seems to suggest, two fundamentally different educational paths, designed with divergent ideological and functional purposes. While Chūgakkō were intended to train professionals for the public sphere, Kōtō Jogakkō aimed to educate women to be "good wives and wise mothers" in the domestic sphere.

also tends to increase. Of course, this is necessary in high schools for the preparation of university entrance examinations, but whatever the reason, it cannot be ignored that the level of knowledge is indeed high. Thus, if we talk about the difference in textbooks and the division of hours, even if we talk about the same intellectual education, middle schools and high schools for girls cannot be compared. In addition, elements such as sewing and cooking classes are already included in the education of girls' high schools. However, educators are generally unaware of this and are unable to make good use of manual education, treating it as having the same significance as intellectual instruction, with the result that it is denigrated. Consequently, all subjects in women's higher education are treated as if they were uniformly intellectual instruction.⁴ In the current state of women's higher education, rather than thinking about how to increase the number of hours of manual education, would it not be more urgent to understand the significance of the manual hours already established and to question their content and teaching approach? In reality, even if the number of hours of manual education in women's colleges is increased, simply increasing them is meaningless and, on the contrary, the level of intellectual education is lowered, and the cultural fields that women can deal with are narrowed more and more. Lowering the level of women's intellectual education or narrowing the cultural fields is not purely a women's issue, but rather a problem that has to do with the prosperity of the nation and the future culture of the state. In today's world of education, what I would like to point out with regard to manual education is that it is something of great interest, but it is not something that should disregard intellectual education; rather, it should be thought of as something that supplements intellectual education. Just as we eat every day to nourish our bodies, intellectual knowledge is fertilizer for the spirit. There may be problems in how we treat these [nutrients], but if there is no knowledge of meaning, our spirit cannot grow. Furthermore, it is known that even if we are just a small sprout, if we are planted in good soil and receive enough fertilizer, we will produce beautiful flowers. In that sense, I am deeply convinced of the need for authentic intellectual education, especially in general education for girls. It is especially worth mentioning that this has a special significance in

⁴ In other words, it is assumed that the weight of intellectual subjects is comparable to that of boys' schools, and a reduction is being promoted.

comparison to boys from the outset, although this is something that sounds strange to the ears of the general public. With regard to the high level of subjects in current elementary and secondary schools, this assumes that boys will continue their specializations and will have to carry that culture with them in their activities when they enter society. This is the basis for the opinion that a high level of intellectual knowledge is necessary, while in the case of women, since they are in charge of domestic tasks in the household, common sense knowledge is sufficient, thus justifying the low level [of their intellectual education]. However, this does not advance one step beyond feudal thinking, and being in the household is not a good reason to justify a lower level of intellectual education. One might think that if one is only at home, it is necessary to increase intellectual education even more. Men go out into society, even if they form a household, and have many opportunities to be educated in different ways. Moreover, it could be said that the intellectual education that men receive during school ends up being completed when they go out into society. Therefore, it is because they have a household that their intellectual education is not blocked and their desire for intellectual knowledge is not impeded. Depending on the quality of a person's mental attitude and work, on the contrary, their lifelong desire for intellectual knowledge is satisfied, and they can also contribute to culture. However, once women become homemakers, since domestic activities in Japan today consist of extremely complicated tasks, they spend almost the entire day pursuing various chores, and they do not even have time to read the newspaper. For this reason, women's intellectual education is drastically reduced when they enter the household, and it is no exaggeration to say that their spiritual growth comes to a virtual halt. Such is the current situation that even women who have received specialized education see their education and natural talents die away when they enter the household. Therefore, since the period for women to acquire intellectual knowledge is before marriage, if this opportunity is lost, the opportunity to improve intellectual knowledge is lost for life.

For this reason, I believe that the significance of intellectual knowledge in female education should not be considered inferior to male education. However, what do those involved in female education say? "The truth is that from birth, women have less knowledge than men." Speaking more from my limited

experience, this is something that is accepted. Until the third year of general female education, beyond individual differences, there are no notable differences between men and women in terms of the desire to learn and its object. However, around the fourth year, with the exception of a minority, the intensity of the desire for intellectual knowledge diminishes, and interest in “typical women’s” work arises, and a change in the object of knowledge can also be seen. That is, there is a shift from the “kid’s” desire for knowledge to a “typical women’s” desire for knowledge. In other words, the interest in systematic scientific culture and scientific knowledge, which is necessary for speculation and precise observation, gives way to a fragmentary, instrumental and practical miscellaneous interest. A friend of mine who is a teacher at a women’s normal school (teacher training school) [女子師範学校] on the outskirts of Tokyo told me, “Even if I tell the girls that they will be carrying dirt, they are happy not to have class.” In reality, rather than memorizing characters, girls prefer cleaning, cooking, that is, manual labor. Perhaps this is the natural disposition [天性] of women, or something close to it.

Today’s education largely seeks to satisfy such women’s natural inclination [性向]. But even if that inclination is a natural disposition, it is not immediately a positive thing if we demand [to train] a wise lady or an intelligent woman, and thus to be a high-minded woman in terms of her overall personality [人格]. Moreover, if it comes from a long period of feudal customs, it is necessary to correct this quickly. Especially when a woman reaches the age of 15 or 16, whether at home or in society, her entire environment distracts her from her interests, causing her desire for knowledge to become more acute, and therefore it is necessary to draw the attention of society in general. The fact that the desire for intellectual knowledge is currently low is not a good reason to lower the level of knowledge. To put it in extreme terms, “since this girl is stupid,” it does not mean that “it is okay for her to be stupid.” As parents, measures will be taken to make her less stupid, out of empathy, but also because it is the right thing to do. Moreover, if it were due to a historical or environmental failure with regard to this stupid girl, society as a whole must take responsibility and seek a method to make her smarter. From this point of view, I find the aspect of intellectual education in women to be extremely important.

Now, what do people generally say? As a member of the household, especially as a mother, the most important thing is affection [愛情], not intellect. Only affection is what makes a woman a woman, and a mother a mother. I myself agree with these words. I only have one mother. I have been able to live this way until today, not only physically but also spiritually, entirely thanks to my mother's affection. If I can think correctly even a little and have a compassionate heart toward all that is great, it is because I am filled with a mother's benevolent love. When I think about the paths I have had to walk until today, it is because my mother lives within me. If I may say something subjective, no matter whose mother we are talking about, when it comes to affection, I believe that no one surpasses my mother; I believe in her, I love her, and I admire her, and now this feeling has deepened over the years. Now, if I could make any kind of request for this mother, and if it were okay to do so, just like the abundance of affection, it would be that she had been a mother whose intellect was equally profound. Intellect does not harm the natural disposition already present in women; on the contrary, it amplifies it, as many examples show. It is through intellectual refinement that one can add more shine to a woman without fault.

In general, for my part, intellect that is completely separated from the spirit and from everyday life can be thought of as a bookshelf stacked with unread books. This intellect is a dead intellect, and one cannot think of intellect in this way. True intellectual knowledge is food for the heart; it is something that adheres to the personality. No matter what one's natural talent may be, if it cannot be polished with intellect, its true value cannot be revealed.

On the other hand, the intellect that is considered useful in practical life in general is the variety of technical knowledge. People who only value this type of intellect usually also [erroneously] consider the true principle of education to be usefulness. Of course, what is useful is necessary in human life, and even more so, it is useful. This is something that has contributed greatly to civilization and culture since ancient times, but the purpose of education is not merely what is useful to human beings, and therefore intellect is not limited to what is useful. Only when comparing "what is useless" with "what is useful," the latter appears as good and as the highest goal. If we try to ask "what is that useful for?", this will become clearer. If it were only a matter of being useful, then a machine, a dog, or a cat is useful in its own way. What makes a human being human lies

beyond that, or rather, far beyond that. Civilization [文明] comes from what is useful. However, the spiritual activity represented in culture [文化] does not come merely from what is useful. No, on the contrary, what uses, produces, and makes the useful possible is “what is useless.” “What is useful” is what “truly serves,” that is, what “is useless.” If this is forgotten, and only what is useful is pursued, if only this type of isolated intellect is valued, it can be said that human activity will soon degenerate into mechanical activity. Since there is a tendency to emphasize only what is considered useful, I believe it is necessary to give sufficient thought to intellect in women’s education. It is as if one is standing in front of a large tree, and people only look at the part that produces from the ground, which can be appreciated, but what it is based on, the equally extensive roots that acquire nutrients from the depths of the earth, is superficially ignored. We must realize that the taller and thicker a tree is, the deeper and thicker its roots will be.

From this perspective, when we think about the problem of intellectual education in women’s education, we will understand for ourselves what meaning it should have. Finally, the trend of despising the intellect is something that must be restricted to the disdain for the inert, formalistic intellect. What can be called the evil of excessive emphasis on intellectual education lies rather in an error of method, and intellectual education should not be thought of as something harmful in itself. Thus, with regard to the problem of intellectual education in women’s education from now on, it is not a question of the negative problem of reducing the intellectual content and increasing the manual content of the subjects, but rather of how to carry out a rich and genuine intellectual education, and how to supplement it with manual education, in order to produce women who are healthy in mind and body and who will carry the future: it is a problem of both method and attitude. I ask that both those involved in the world of education and households with children in general consider this.