

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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EVERYBODY'S BUSINESS

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Part 1 of 4

INTRODUCTION

1. While the title of this lecture is not inappropriate, it does not fully comprehend the subject I wish to discuss this evening.
 - a. Another title that would cover part of the subject I will be considering might have been: "The Threatened Disappearance of Culture—And What Must Be Done To Prevent That From Happening."
 - b. Still another might have been: "Aspen's Commitment to the Preservation of Humanistic Learning and the Restoration of Culture."
2. In lectures that I have delivered from this platform in recent years I have expressed my concern about the state of humanistic learning in contemporary society, not only here but also abroad.
 - a. And, in this connection, I have wondered how it came about that, in 1950, when this institution was established by Walter Paepcke, he named it "The Aspen Institute of Humanistic Studies." How did that phrase—"Humanistic Studies"—occur to him as the precisely right denomination for the purpose to which this new institution should be devoted.?
 - b. I think I have now found a clue to the answer to that question. It is in a letter written to Walter Paepcke by Ortega y Gasset in October 1949, following the Goethe Festival here in July.
 - (1) The stationery on which that letter was written carried, as its letterhead, the words "Instituto de Humanidades"—referring to Ortega's Institute of Humanities in Madrid.

- (2) The letter urged Walter to establish something similar—a school of humanities—at Aspen.
- c. My reading of Ortega’s 1949 letter to Walter Paepcke occurred last Spring at a time when I had just re-read two books written by Ortega in 1930—*The Revolt of the Masses* and *The Mission of the University*.
 - (1) What I found in these books crystallized my own thinking about the crisis that confronts us—the threat to humanistic learning in general and to the preservation of culture in our society.
 - (2) Ortega identified humanistic learning with culture. He referred to his Institute of Humanities as a Faculty of Culture.
 - (3) I agree with this identification, wishing to add only that what Ortega is referring to might also be called “the learning of the generalist” as opposed to the kind of knowledge that confers the competence of the specialist.
- 3. So much for the background. of this talk. Let me now indicate the. three matters I would like to cover this evening:
 - a. *First*, my reasons for thinking that the plight of humanistic learning or of general culture is desperate—that we are threatened with its demise or disappearance.
 - b. *Second*, my criticism of current thinking about the humanities and my correction, of it by what I think is the right way to differentiate between humanistic learning and all other forms of knowledge.
 - c. *Third*, and *finally*, since I have so little hope that our institutions of higher learning can be reformed to prevent the disappearance of humanistic learning and general culture, I would like to propose that the Aspen Institute do what it can to stem the tide in the wrong direction.
 - (1) When Ortega proposed in 1949 the establishment at Aspen of an Institute of Humanities, he did not have in mind
 - anything like the Aspen Executive Program
 - anything like the Thought Leading to Action Programs
 - (2) These, and such other projects as the one on Governance, or on Human Rights, or on the Corporation and

Society, or on Financing the Future, or on Structures for Peace, are among the outstanding achievements of the Aspen Institute during the last ten years.

- (3) My proposal contemplates something to supplement all of them, something quite different from all of them, something that would be nearer to what Ortega had in mind in 1949.
- (4) Please be patient and let me lay the ground for my proposal before I present it. I turn at once to the first of 'the matters I would like to have you consider—the threatened disappearance of culture.

I. *THE DISAPPEARANCE OF CULTURE*

- A. During the last few years, my concern about the state of the higher learning in America has reached the panic stage, and my hopes for the reform of the American college and university have dwindled to the verge of despair.
 1. The trouble is not simply that the sciences have displaced the humanities. The humanities, as currently taught and studied in those departments of the university that are nonscientific, are as much addicted to specialized scholarship as are the scientific departments to highly specialized research.
 2. The trouble rather is that the broadly educated generalist has become an endangered species.
 3. The ever-increasing specialization of knowledge in all fields of scholarship and research has almost completely displaced the learning of the generalist, not only in the graduate and professional schools of the university, but also in the undergraduate college.
 - a. The termination of President Conant's program of general education at Harvard College, and the substitution for it of the recently adopted "core curriculum," is but one sign of the disaster that has overtaken American institutions of higher learning. The core curriculum's requirement of a relatively small number of courses in specialized areas of science and scholarship may be regarded as some check on the indigestible smorgasbord of the elective system, but it can hardly be defended as a restoration of truly general education.

- b. In most of our colleges, the elective system continues unabated. Its only requirement—the choice of a major in one field of subject-matter and a minor in another—compels students to specialize before they have acquired the general cultivation that would acquaint them with the ideas and disciplines that are the components of human culture.
 - c. When, in 1936, President Robert M. Hutchins of the University of Chicago delivered the Storrs Lectures at Yale, later published under the title *The Higher Learning in America*, he and I thought that the undergraduate college should be emancipated from the paralyzing clutch of the graduate and professional schools. They, like major league baseball clubs, tend to regard the college as little more than a bush league feeder station.
 - (1) We had some hopes for the establishment of a completely required curriculum that would discipline the young in the skills of learning and that would cultivate their minds generally before some of them elect to become specialists or professionals of one sort or another.
 - (2) Our slender hope then was not entirely ill-founded. However much the colleges at that time needed drastic improvement, they were then in a golden age compared with the state they are in today.
 - d. In the forty years that have elapsed, the elective system has become even more chaotic in its offerings (just glance at any college catalogue); specialization in every area of inquiry and study has grown more intense; and those who, by talent and temperament, might have been disposed to become generalist teachers in programs of general education, have been disabled for that vocation, crushed in the coils of what William James called “the Ph.D. octopus.”
- B. The slight hope possible to cherish in the 1930s has shrunk to the vanishing point today. The obstacles to the reforms required for the preservation of culture through the acculturation of the young now appear to be insuperable. The following seven things that would have to be done no longer seem feasible.

1. The acquirement of specialized scientific knowledge or of specialized scholarship in non-scientific or professional fields (the kind of knowledge that is not everybody's business) should be reserved for the graduate and professional schools.
 2. The Ph. D. should cease to be the *sine qua non* for the appointment of college teachers, Their competence should be the competence of generalists, not of specialists.
 3. The members of a college faculty should not be professors of this or that subject-matter, or even members of this or that department in the graduate school.
 4. The college faculty should be completely autonomous, completely emancipated from the influence of the graduate school.
 5. The elective system, with its majors and minors, should be abolished.
 6. Parents should send their young to college and the young should go to college not, as at present, mainly to acquire highly saleable skills or to earn good livings, but solely for the purpose of becoming cultured human beings.
 7. Corporations should recognize that the most important posts they have to offer can be better filled by broadly trained generalists than by narrowly trained specialists.
- C. None of these things is likely to happen; none can be brought about against the tide that is overwhelmingly in the opposite direction. In the state of mind induced by these dismal considerations, I recently reread Jose Ortega y Gasset's *Revolt of the Masses*, first published in Spain in 1930.
1. In it, I found a chapter entitled "The Barbarism of Specialization." He wrote there of the scientist who

is only acquainted with one science, and even of that one only knows the small corner in which he is an active investigator. He even proclaims it as a virtue. He takes no cognizance of what lies outside the narrow territory specially cultivated by himself, and gives the name of "dilettantism" to any curiosity for the general scheme of knowledge.
 2. Ortega referred, to him and to other narrowly trained specialists of professionals as "learned ignoramus"—

learned, but uncultured. “Anyone who wishes, Ortega went on to say,

can observe the stupidity of thought, judgment, and action shown today in politics, art, religion, and the general problems of life and the world by the “men of science,” and, of course, behind them, the doctors, engineers, financiers, teachers, and so on.

3. As a result of an excessive specialization that is not balanced by general education, we have today, Ortega declared in 1930, more scientists, scholars, and professional men and women than ever before, but many fewer cultured human beings.

D. Reading that chapter sent me to a lecture Ortega gave earlier that year on “The Mission of the University” (published in Spain under that title, but not translated into English until 1944). There I discovered a proposal for the reform of the university as radical as that proposed by Mr. Hutchins in 1936, but unknown to him at the time he delivered the Storrs Lectures at Yale.

1. The central mission of the university, according to Ortega, is not discharged by the training of scholars, scientists, and members of the learned professions. While it should perform these functions, these are, in Ortega’s judgment, secondary.
 - a. The primary function of our institutions of higher learning is to civilize the citizens of a democratic society by introducing them to the essentials of their culture. “Culture,” Ortega wrote, “is the vital system of ideas of a period.”
 - b. It is not to be identified with science, though science is one component of it.
 - c. “Compared with the mediaeval university,” Ortega declared, “the contemporary university has developed the mere seed of professional instruction into an enormous activity; it has added the function of research; and it has abandoned almost entirely the teaching or transmission of culture.”
 - d. As a result, Ortega went on to say, most Europeans today “are *uncultured*. They are ignorant of the essential system of ideas concerning the world and man, which belongs to our time.”

- e. Today, he continued, the citizen “is the new barbarian.... This new barbarian is above all the professional man, more learned than ever before, but at the same time more uncultured—the engineer, the physician, the lawyer, the scientist.”
2. If I were to translate Ortega’s message into terms appropriate to American institutions at present, I would render it as follows.
 - a. The primary function of our institutions of higher learning, which means the function they should perform at the undergraduate level of the college, is “to teach the ordinary student to be a cultured person.”
 - b. It should not waste his time by doing for him in college what will be done later if he becomes a specialist in one or another field of science or scholarship, and which, if he is not to become a specialist, should not be done for him at all.
 - c. Such specialized instruction, along with training for the learned professions, should be reserved for the graduate and professional schools of the university, and should not be allowed to determine in any way the curriculum of the undergraduate college.
 - d. The college should be the place where culture is transmitted by a curriculum entirely devoted to the humanistic learning of the generalist—philosophical in the sense that it deals with the basic ideas that are everybody’s business, as specialized science and scholarship are not.
 - e. Unfortunately, philosophy today has become as specialized and technical as science and other forms of scholarship. It is no longer everybody’s business as it should be. The restoration of general education in our colleges should be accompanied by the restoration of philosophy as the consideration of the basic ideas that, as Ortega said, constitute the framework of culture.
 3. I cannot refrain from quoting one more passage from *The Mission of the University*. Ortega maintained that the selection of teachers for the faculty of an undergraduate college should not depend on their skill as investigators or researchers, but on their talent for teaching (and, I would add, on their being themselves cultivated

generalists, not uncultured specialists). I quote: “One of the evils attending the confusion of the university with science has been the awarding of professorships in keeping with the mania of the times, to research workers who are nearly always very poor professors, and regard their teaching as time stolen away from their work in the laboratory or the archives.”

4. All this in 1930! Anyone acquainted with the present state of American institutions of higher learning must know how much worse the situation is in 1978. The disease of specialization was accurately diagnosed by Ortega in 1930 and by Hutchins in 1936; but their prognoses did not accurately foresee that its *sequelae*, including the disappearance of culture from, our colleges and, universities and from our society, might make the malady incurable fifty years later.
5. The reforms they urged a half century ago no longer motivate even a sympathetic minority in, the academic profession. The evil that confronts us is not C. P. Snow’s conflict between two cultures—the sciences vs. humanities—but the demise of culture itself, fragmented into an unintelligible chaos by the rampant specialization that has invaded all fields of learning. What Aristotle defined as *paideia*, the learning of the generalist that was the saving leaven. in Western civilization from the Greeks until, the end of the 19th century, no longer exists.



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