

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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EVERYBODY'S BUSINESS

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Part 3 of 4

3. When about twenty-five years ago I worked with Father John Cavanaugh, then President of Notre Dame, to create at that university a Program of General Studies that would, like the program at St. John's College in Annapolis, have a completely required curriculum devoted to humanistic and philosophical learning, the learning of the generalist, the opposition came from the professors of English and other languages and literature, from professors of history, and even from professors of philosophy, as much as it came from professors of mathematics and of the natural and social sciences.
 - a. Why? Because all these men have been trained as specialists in the fields in which they had earned their Ph.D.'s. None was himself a generalist, none was a man of humanistic or philosophical learning.
 - b. As professors of specialized knowledge, they wished to impart it to the young in the college courses they taught, even though, in most cases, they were mainly interested in their own, on-going research and its effect on their advancement in the graduate school.
 - c. A completely required curriculum of general studies would have prevented that and would, in addition, have been uncongenial to their professional interests if they had been asked to participate in it as teachers.
 - d. In this connection, it is worth recalling that the introduction of the elective system by President

Eliot at Harvard at the end of the last century was similarly motivated. It was intended to allow the specialized disciplines of the graduate school, modelled after the German university, to gain a foothold in the undergraduate college; and, through the insidious system of majors and minors, to draw the undergraduate student into specialized study and away from general learning,

4. Examine the catalogue of any undergraduate college today, not only colleges that belong to universities with graduate schools that control the college curriculum, but also colleges separate from universities but which imitate the pattern set by colleges in universities.
 - a. What do you find? A vast assemblage of variegated courses from A to Z representing branches of specialized knowledge, both scientific and nonscientific, that constitute the multiplicity of fragmented departments in the graduate school.
 - b. In a great many instances, the courses offered got into the catalogue in the first place because of the highly specialized research interest of some professor in the graduate school.
 - c. The catalogue, with its system of majors and minors, presents no program of general learning. On the contrary, it prevents the existence of such a program.
 - d. The competition for the student's attention is not a competition between humanistic learning, on the one hand., and scientific knowledge, on the other. It is only a competition between one set of specialized disciplines, currently classified as sciences, and another set of specialized disciplines in other fields of scholarship, such as history, literature, and philosophy, currently classified as humanities, where that word does not signify that they are truly humanistic, but only that they are non-scientific.
 - e. At the University of Chicago in the thirties and forties, President Hutchins tried to reverse the picture by instituting a completely required curriculum which would give all the students in the

college the humanistic learning of the generalist, through the reading of great books and through discipline in the liberal arts.

- (1) His *Higher Learning in America*, published in 1936, was an eloquent appeal for a reform of undergraduates education by emancipating the college from the graduate school and by re-constituting it in line with the vision of general humanistic learning set forth by Whewell, Mill, and Newman.
- (2) He succeeded in, establishing this reform at the University of Chicago, but never as fully as he wished, and his success was short-lived. Within a few years of his departure from the university, the graduate departments re-asserted themselves and dismantled the Hutchins college.
- (3) To my knowledge, the Hutchins reform persists only in two places—at St. John's College and in the Program of General Studies at Notre Dame, which, it must be added, enrolls only a handful of the undergraduates at that university; the rest are exposed to the elective system with its majors and minors in highly specialized knowledge.

F. Up to this point, I have repeatedly insisted upon and employed the distinction between what is everybody's business and what is not—between the learning of the generalist and the knowledge of the specialist. But I have not explained the distinction itself. I have not explained what makes a certain kind of learning everybody's business, and how it differs from the kind of knowledge that is not everybody's business. The quickest and most effective way of doing that is to explain why philosophy is everybody's business and why the sciences are not.

1. The philosopher appeals only to the common experience of mankind, the experience that all human beings have simply by being awake, without the slightest effort of deliberate and methodic investigation, without having any prior questions in mind. to answer by means of investigation.

2. In sharp contrast, the scientist is, first and foremost, an investigator, a man who devises special methods of observation. in order to answer, questions he has formulated. As a result of his methodically carried out observations, whether in laboratories or not, whether with instrumentation or not, the experience on which the scientist relies is the very special experience produced by his methodical observations.
3. Common experience, I repeat, is the everyday experience of the ordinary man—experience he has without any effort or plan of investigation on his part. The core of common experience is the universal experience that is the same for all human beings at all Limes and places.
4. Let me read you a statement by George Santayana which conveys most eloquently what I mean by the universal core of common experience.

For good or ill, I am an ignorant man, almost a poet, and I can only spread a feast of what everybody knows. Fortunately, exact science and the books of the learned are not necessary to establish my essential doctrine, nor can any of them claim a higher warrant than it has in itself: for it rests on public experience. It needs, to prove it, only the stars, the seasons, the swarm of animals, the spectacle of birth and death, of cities and wars. My philosophy is justified, and has been justified in all ages and countries, by the facts before every man's eyes....In. the past or in the future, my :tang gage and my borrowed knowledge would have been different, but under whatever sky I had been. born, since it is the same sky, I should have had the same philosophy.

5. Like philosophy, the liberal arts are also everybody's business, at least to the extent that they are skills the mind employs in reflecting upon. the common experience of mankind and upon the communication of that experience or of reflections about it in language.
 - a. Imaginative literature—epic, dramatic, and lyric poetry, novels and plays—is also like philosophy in that it too draws upon the common experience of mankind and represents reflections about it. Nothing but common. experience and reflection, about it is needed. for the understwitting of such literature.,

- b. Even the literature of the sciences and of mathematics can be read and understood in a way that brings them within the grasp of the generalist. Who, in the light of his common sense and his common experience, asks philosophical questions about them and uses the liberal arts to pursue the answers.”
- G. I hope I have now made clear why all humanistic studies, like, philosophy, are everybody’s business and why the sciences are not.
 - 1. In addition, I hope that what I have said also explains why the learning of the generalist includes a humanistic and philosophical approach to all subject-matters—to the kind of philosophical reading and discussion of books that treats all of them as humane letters, whether they are books written by poets or philosophers, by historians or scientists, or by physicians, lawyers, or theologians.
 - 2. To this, I must add one very important qualification. Until the last hundred and fifty years or so, great books in every field were written for the intelligent layman. This is true of Galileo, Newton, and Darwin, of Augustine and Aquinas, of Herodotus, Thucydides, Tacitus and Gibbon, of Plato, Aristotle, Locke, and Mill, of Machiavelli and Hobbes, as well as of Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Shakespeare.
 - a. But since the rise of specialization in almost all fields of research and scholarship, since the crushing of the generalist in the coils of what William James called it “the Ph.D. octopus,” since the modern university has outlawed generalists from its faculties by demanding of its professors highly specialized competence in some narrowly restricted field of special knowledge, it is no longer true,
 - b. In the early years of this century, Bergson, Santayana, James, Dewey, and Russell wrote philosophical books intended for the intelligent layman, not just for the of their colleagues in departments of philosophy. In the last 25 years, few if any books like that have appeared. Philosophers are now as much specialists as their scientific colleagues in the university: they write, whether books or periodical articles, only for their peers—other professors of philosophy.

- c. What I have just said holds comparably in the fields of literary criticism, the study of literature, so-called scientific or sociological history, the history of the arts, and so on,
 - d. In other words, almost all subject-matters have now become the exclusive province of one or another form of specialized scholarship or technique of research.
3. That is Why there is no good. choice, either with respect to education. or to culture, if one has to choose between the present academic discipline that are misnamed “humanities” and the academic disciplines that are classified as the sciences. For both groups of disciplines are essentially alike in being highly specialized branches of expert knowledge, fragmented into minute subdivisions and rendered incommunicable to one another by the technical jargons that each. employs.
 4. Let me repeat what I said at the beginning—that the only good, the only meaningful choice, is one that permits us to choose the humanistic and philosophical learning of the generalist, learning which belongs to everybody and should be the common culture in which everybody participates; and, having made that choice, we would assign a secondary and subordinate place—education and in culture—to the non-humanistic, non-philosophical knowledge that should be reserved for scholars, researchers, or professionals in special fields.
 5. Let me also remind you of the drastic reforms that this calls for in our institutions of higher learning.
 - a. To ensure that the learning Which an. undergraduate college cultivates is the humanistic and philosophical learning of the generalist, the members of a college faculty should not be professors of this or that subject-matter, or members of this or that academic department.
 - b. If possible, they should not be disabled for college teaching by having formed the wrong habits inculcated by working for a Ph. D. Their competence should be the competence of generalists, not the competence of specialists.
 - c. The acquirement of specialized scientific knowledge or of specialized scholarly knowledge in non-

scientific fields—the kind of knowledge that is not everybody’s business—should be reserved for the graduate school, where it is ‘proper to have academic departments and professors of this or that.

- d. And, most important of all, the college faculty should be completely autonomous, completely emancipated from the influence of the departments in the graduate school.
6. Only if these reforms were to be accomplished in our educational institutions, and only if human beings thus properly schooled continued throughout their adult life to pursue the humanistic and philosophical learning of the generalist would there be any hope for the restoration of a truly human culture in which all can participate—one culture, not two, and certainly not the multiplicity of cultural fragments which constitute the cultural chaos that now confronts and bewilders us.



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