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Colleges, in like manner, have their indispensable office—to teach elements. But they can only highly serve us, when they aim not to drill, but to create; when they gather from far every ray of various genius to their hospitable halls, and, by concentrated fires, set the hearts of youth on flame. Thought and knowledge are natures in which apparatus and pretension avail nothing. Gowns, and pecuniary foundations, though of towns of gold, can never countervail the least sentence or syllable of wit. Forget this, and our American colleges will recede in their public importance, whilst they grow richer every year.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, from an address on
The American Scholar, August 31, 1837

the professor or THE DIALOGUE?

Mortimer J. Adler

• PART TWO •

Now I am not saying anything new. This is what Plato says in the *Republic*; this is what Aristotle says in the *Ethics*; this is what Aquinas says in his commentary on the *Ethics*; and this is what Gilson says they all say. In the *Republic*, where a program of education is laid down for the guardians of the Republic, the first twenty years contain music and gymnastics—the skills of coordination and some cultivation of the sensibilities; from twenty to thirty there are the mathematical arts, and you could have added the arts of reading and writing as well as the arts of calculation. After thirty-five they go out and do the work of the world, acquiring experience until they are fifty. After fifty—fifty-five, even

—they come back into the Academy to study dialectics, which for Plato is metaphysics, the contemplation of the Ideas and the world of Being. For Plato, anyone under fifty is much too young. Aristotle says the same thing in the opening book of the *Ethics*: you can't teach ethics to young people. What you do with young people is cultivate the moral virtues. You can train them by rewards and punishments, but you can't teach them to understand the principles of moral philosophy or political philosophy. These are entirely beyond their experience. The vagaries of their emotions, the waywardness of their passions—these things make it impossible for them. And the thing that Aquinas adds in a commentary is that this is what 'young' means. Gilson in one of his wittiest and most perceptive papers, "Thomas Aquinas and our Colleagues,"¹ points out that what St. Thomas meant by a young man was anything up to fifty. Fifty was the end of youth. From that point on you were mature. St. Thomas says again and again that not only ethics but metaphysics cannot be studied by anyone under fifty. And what are the reasons for fifty, by the way? It is not merely because you need a certain amount of experience but because at about fifty the body begins to weaken. With our modern health devices it may be sixty or seventy, but the body has got to begin to decay a little before the mind is emancipated from the passions and the weight of the body. These subjects require the mind to rise above the senses and imagination, to get rid of the body; and so it takes this kind of growing old for the study of these difficult subjects. (You see that people who run around in a gymnasium couldn't possibly understand them.)

The conclusions to be drawn from these observations are that education requires a lifetime and that the real fruits it is aiming at—understanding, insight and wisdom—are not achieved until fairly late in a man's life, until he is really mature. This is particularly true of certain subjects which are somehow most closely connected with the pursuit of wisdom. It is also, I think, true of the study of any ideas at all. I have taught the Great Books in college and for many years to the young; and it is perfectly obvious that the soil is too shallow. You can't plant an idea in such shallow soil. It doesn't take root. Teaching the same books to older people well along in life you can begin to see ideas take root. You can see that

¹ Given as an Aquinas Lecture at the Aquinas Foundation at Princeton University, March 7, 1953, and reprinted by the Princeton University Press. The lecture is reprinted in entirety in *A Gilson Reader: Selections from the writings of Etienne Gilson*, edited with an introduction by Anton C. Pegis (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1957), A Doubleday Image Book, D 55. Page references are to this edition.

there is something there for the ideas to get into. Young people have nothing with which to take hold of an idea. This means that we simply cannot inculcate wisdom into college students or expect them to acquire it, nor can we expect them to become philosophers at that early age, except in the Socratic sense, surely, of being lovers of wisdom. That their emotions should be right, that they should somehow be persuaded that wisdom is the best thing in the world, or of all the natural virtues the thing most to love and seek; this is possible and in this sense we hope that every college student becomes a philosopher: a lover of wisdom, but not wise.

With these things said, then, what should be the main aims of liberal schooling especially at the college level? Let me answer that question first in secular terms and then in Catholic terms. What should be the main aim of a liberal arts college if it is secular? I say only three things: one, to develop in the students the skills of learning, the liberal arts; two, to acquaint the students, so far as can be done in four years, with the whole tradition of learning; three, to impel them to go on with learning after school and pursue the truth for a lifetime. Do not suppose that you can make students master any part of the tradition of learning; just acquaint them with it, as if you took them up to the threshold, the antechamber or portico of a great room and swung the doors open to look around and see what is there. "Isn't it wonderful! Don't you want to go in and look more carefully? But remember if you really go in there and start looking it will take you your whole lifetime before you get out." All you do in college is open the door and say "There it is!" If a college does these three things I say that it has done all that can be done with young people. There is not another thing that you can do with them at that stage of life, but hope that the circumstances of their lives and their moral responsibility to themselves will be such that they will go on to discharge their obligation.

It is with these very limited objectives in mind, which I still think are the right objectives for a liberal arts college, that I have always recommended for the curriculum of such colleges, secular colleges, the use of the Great Books. Not, I assure you, because the young men in college can really understand or master them. Everything I have said would indicate that the young can't really understand the great books, though believe me you must allow them the illusion that they can. Youth is so terribly proud; it has to kid itself that it understands these things. And the illusion is all right because it keeps them at it.

The reason why you use the books is not because the young really can understand them but because these books are the best materials

for cultivating the skills of learning itself, the liberal arts, and for doing that other thing, giving that open view and acquaintance with the tradition of learning which you hope the student will investigate as he goes on. And I think that this kind of curriculum, if well administered, leaves the student with a really deep realization of how little he knows and how much he has to learn, which is the abiding motivation you want to leave him with in college so that he may go on learning afterwards. The worst thing that could happen to a student is to graduate from college thinking he knew it all. That student would have been ruined by college, ruined! If he comes out with a decent humility about how little he knows and how much he has to learn you have some hope for him.

Now let's consider a Catholic college. The main difference, as I see it, that calls for modification here, is the addition to the truths of reason and of sense, the whole realm of natural knowledge, of the truths of faith based on revelation: supernatural knowledge. Sacred or dogmatic theology, as contrasted with natural theology, can be taught dogmatically. Yet even here, of course, there are profound differences among the great speculative theologians—between Aquinas and Augustine, between Aquinas and Bonaventure, between Aquinas and Suarez. These philosophical differences within the framework of sacred theology the young cannot understand.

I would like to have you listen to two pages of Gilson on the difference between the Catholic and the secular colleges. Gilson, talking at Princeton, wanted it to be understood that teaching philosophy at Princeton was impossible. And he was right, but then he said very nicely: You realize that I'm caught here, because though St. Thomas is saying this, he obviously thought he was teaching and studying philosophy, and he died before he was fifty. Now how do I put those two things together? Gilson's answer is really worth listening to; it has a bearing on the one modification I would make for teaching in the Catholic college. He said:

Now while Thomas Aquinas said that young men were not qualified to study metaphysics, including natural theology, he certainly never said, nor thought, that young people should not study revealed theology, including what of metaphysics and ethics it may contain. He could not perceive any contradiction between what he had written and what he had done, because the two questions were entirely different. He had written that a man with no religion, or at least, with no religious revelation, if his ultimate goal were to become a philosopher, had better wait for the later part of his life before handling metaphysical prob-

lems. Himself a young Christian, and already a monk, Thomas had studied philosophy in view of becoming a theologian in his thirties, and not at all a “philosopher” such as Plato or Aristotle. Two questions, two answers. Do you intend to become a metaphysician? Then you can hardly begin too late. Do you want to become a theologian? Then you cannot begin too soon.

What does this mean for our own problem? So far as I can see, what makes the difference between the two cases is the presence or absence of a religious revelation. Now, obviously, no religious revelation can teach us metaphysics, nor even, to the extent that it is a speculative science known in the light of natural reason, ethics. God commands or forbids. He is no professor of ethics. God tells us about Himself; He does not give us metaphysical demonstrations of what He says. Then how can revelation help the philosopher? Not by giving him ready-made conclusions which he has only to demonstrate. First, because revelation teaches many conclusions about God which no metaphysics can demonstrate; secondly, because, even when it can be demonstrated by natural reason, its demonstration does not make a revealed truth more certain to the theologian than it was before. Still more obviously, it would not do for a Christian to deduce by natural reasoning the consequences following from an article of faith and to call it philosophy. Then what is the difference between philosophizing in the light of revelation and philosophizing in the light of natural reason alone?²

His answer to this by the way, is the concreteness of the one and the abstractness of the other, and he goes on in another paragraph to say:

The main reason of Thomas Aquinas against an early teaching of metaphysics was the exceedingly abstract nature of its object. Religion cannot change it, but religion provides an exceedingly concrete approach to certain notions which the metaphysician considers in an abstract way. To take only one example, I do not consider it easy to interest a class of undergraduates in the metaphysical notion of “pure act”; but if you can tell them what you call pure act is another name for God, then they will realize that you are talking about something they already know, and not about a mere word. If, moreover, the teaching of religious knowledge has already given them at least the beginnings of a theological training, then your students will find it most natural to use the light of their reason in order to

² *Op. cit.* pp. 289-290.

investigate the why of His commandments with respect to moral conduct. All the concreteness conferred by religion upon the abstract object of metaphysical speculation, all the moral maturity of a young man, or woman, long trained to the complexity of ethical problems, can be considered so many favorable conditions for the earlier ripening of aptness to philosophical speculation. In the thirteenth century, philosophy was taught in such a religious atmosphere; it really was a preamble to theology, just as certain philosophically demonstrable propositions were held to be preambles to Christian faith. This, I submit, is the reason why what applied to philosophers did not apply to himself, to his own masters, nor to his fellow students, in the mind of Thomas Aquinas. Unless we recreate around our teaching of philosophy a like religious atmosphere, I fail to see how we can avoid the objections raised by Thomas Aquinas against the college teaching of metaphysics and ethics.³

I don't know how perfectly true what Gilson says is, but I think it does offer a solution. Let theology (sacred theology, dogmatic theology) be taught all through a Catholic college, and such philosophy as can be taught in the context of it—always in the context of it. Apart from this, I would still urge the use of the Great Books to cultivate the liberal arts, to become acquainted with the tradition of learning, and to be stimulated to go on learning. With this one addition which Gilson suggests, the situation is the same for a Catholic college as for a secular one.

To turn now more narrowly to the problem of teaching the history of philosophy, it is my own feeling, and I would like to read you one more passage from Gilson to support this, that the history of philosophy can be taught and understood well only by men who are accomplished philosophers. In other words, substituting the history of philosophy for philosophy is no solution to the problem of teaching philosophy to the young, because I assure you in proportion that they are not accomplished philosophers, they can't understand the history of philosophy. On this let me once more read you a very telling statement by Gilson speaking now of himself—very poignantly, by the way:

I distinctly remember a young man of twenty passionately interested in metaphysical problems, but fully aware of the fact that he could not understand the metaphysicians. He thought it wise to bide his time and to teach history or philosophy in order to learn philosophy before teaching it. Many years later, he

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 290-291.

began to realize that the history of philosophy requires identically the same intellectual maturity as philosophy itself, because unless you are something of a philosopher, you may well report what philosophers have said, you cannot understand it. Their words are in your mouth, Thomas would say, their ideas are not in your mind. He then began to understand why Henri Bergson was living in constant fear of his future historians. Just as art critics say what they think about what artists do, so historians of philosophy say what they understand of what philosophers think. In both cases, it seldom amounts to much.⁴

I think this is simply true. And I would like to have you consider for a moment the reason why it is true. This is important, because the word that characterizes our intellectual age most deeply is: historicism. All the way down the line we are given to the fallacies and foibles and sins of historicism. History—the history of thought or the history of culture—raises not only more problems than it can solve, but *all* the problems it raises it cannot solve. Let me illustrate this sharply.

The fundamental fact of intellectual or cultural history is the fact of diversity. It would be wonderful if it were the other way around; there would be no problems at all. The fundamental fact which the history of any culture, the history of cultures, or the comparative studies of periods and men reveals is that they differ—differ profoundly. You have the diversity of pagan and Christian and secular cultures, and within a single culture, the culture of the ancient world, classical and Hellenic culture, you have the great diversities of Plato and Aristotle and Democritus. In the Christian world, particularly in the last two centuries after the middle ages, you have the basic diversity between the Augustinians and the Aristotelians. And there are many more.

Now there are two attitudes you can take towards the diversity when you find it. One is the attitude of the historian as a relativist. The diversity is simply a diversity. He does not try to do anything about it. In fact, he has no interest in the truth; he is interested only in the historical picture. And he is usually interested in this, by the way, without a sense that there is more diversity in historical scholarship than any place else. There is hardly anything that any historian says of the past, any interpretation given of any period by any writer but you can find another historian who can give an opposite one. The field of historical scholarship is ridden with diversity.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

There is another attitude, the only attitude, I would say, that one can take towards history if one is interested in the truth. That is the dialectical attitude. The problems history poses require the most rigorous, the most difficult kind of dialectical procedure. If you believe that there is truth; that men can rationally pursue the truth; that when men differ they really disagree; that where there is disagreement truth and falsity does not lie equally on both sides or in the same respect; if you believe this then your task is—in the face of intellectual or cultural diversity—to say what are the issues, who agrees with whom, who disagrees. And when you get a real issue or a real disagreement—which is so seldom, so difficult to get—you keep asking what are the reasons on either side, until finally you get in that frame of mind where the pursuit of truth is not deterred but in some sense facilitated by examining the historical facts about human thought as it exists up to the present.

Revelation or faith may enable us to make, dogmatically, certain choices among the diverse views men have held. But even within the framework of accepted dogmas the problem of diversity remains to be dealt with dialectically. The great works of the middle ages, I assure you, did not come out of the air. The *Sic et Non* of Abelard, the *Book of Sentences* of Peter Lombard, are the beginnings of this careful, patient, systematic work of dealing with diversity, of ordering it, clarifying it, to make further intellectual work possible: “On the one hand ... on the other hand ... here are the agreements and disagreements, here are the lines of opposition.”

To illustrate a dialectical problem within a dogmatic framework, let me give you an example. The Church in the second part of the last century declared dogmatically—*de fide*—that the existence of God could be demonstrated by human reason. It is an article of Catholic faith that the existence of God can be proved from reason. You understand that the declaration is not that the existence of God *has* been demonstrated; that would be an historical statement, and hardly, I think, possible for the Church to define. The proposition that is declared *de fide* is that the existence of God can be demonstrated: that the nature of God and the nature of human reason is such that the human reason by its natural processes, can, unaided by faith, come to a rationally certain knowledge of God’s existence. I say that within the framework set by that article of faith the dispute about any particular proof or set of proofs of the existence of God can go on from now until the end of time. And I assure you that, to my mind, the most living question is: how to prove the existence of God. The supposition that it was done in the thirteenth century, that it is done in scholastic textbooks today is, I think, on

the face of it preposterous. It is the most difficult thing in the world to do. Everything else in one's mind is a preparation for it. The notion that we have done it is, I think, presumptuous. The dogma can be absolutely true and it can also be true that the consideration, the human consideration of one proof or another, the slow perfection of the proof, the consideration of conflicting arguments about the proofs can go on until the end of time.

Now the interesting thing about history in this connection is that history cannot explain the discovery of a single truth. If any truth has ever been discovered no historical facts at all—nothing about the man's time or culture or background or setting—ever in the least explains how this man discovered the truth. The only thing that history can ever *explain* are some of the errors that men make. This is very interesting indeed. You can by the limitations of an historical period explain how something that is learned later was not learned earlier; you can never explain why it was learned when it was learned.

Let me give you two examples of this. Aristotle's doctrine of natural slavery I hold to be flatly false; yet, Aristotle was a very bright man and didn't make too many errors in the course of a large volume of work. Why did he make this crucial one? I think there is some possibility that by looking at him in his historical setting, at the conditions of Greek life and its slave society—looking at what he must have looked at as a man who walked the streets of Greek cities—we can learn how the facts of life as he saw them could have led him into error. (There are too many people living in this world, by the way, who are guilty of this error; and where you find them, look at where they live. Look at the conditions in which they grow up. You may in this way *explain* the error).

Let me give you a more obvious case. The error in Aquinas about the matter of the heavenly bodies being incorruptible is perfectly intelligible in terms of pre-telescopic observation of the heavens. The stars and heavenly bodies *look* as if they neither come into being nor pass away but are merely moved locally, without growing or changing in any way. Given telescopes the error is corrected. It isn't the truth you can explain; it is the error that you explain by the conditions of life within a culture.

So let me say this, most summarily: for the understanding of what is right and what is true we must always go to nature or to reason—sometimes both of these aided by revelation—but never to history. History never teaches us what is right and what is true. It can't possibly. The same holds true for what is universal and what

is permanent. If you try to find out what is universal about mankind, the universals of human life and society, you can't find them in history. To find out what is enduring, universal and permanent, you must again go to reason and then to nature. All that history can tell you about is the particular, the evanescent, the changing.

One last remark about the teaching of philosophy and its difficulties. This is personal and I shall make it brief; if anyone wants to push me on it, I shall be glad to answer questions. At the Institute for Philosophical Research we have been studying the idea of freedom now for eight years and by the end of ten years we shall, I think, have finished the work with the publication of the second volume. The first volume is already out. This has been a painstaking, long, drawn-out, careful examination of the whole literature of this vast subject. So far as we can tell, we have examined everything—writings by scientists, theologians, philosophers, historians, social scientists—everything that has been written on freedom. I just want to tell you what my impression of the history of human thought on this one subject is. My guess is that it's equally true of every other subject. The twenty-five hundred years of the recorded history of western thought is, to use the language of the British airmen in the last war, simply a "poor show"—not very good. It doesn't amount to very much. This is all right, too, because one would expect that the race has, you know, a hundred million years to go, and we'll do better. But the first twenty-five hundred years of thought in the West doesn't get along very far. I mean simply this: that the best writers in this field (and among the best, the most recent) are for the most part critically deficient in the knowledge of what others have written on the subject. There is no writer who even, I think, has a full acquaintance with what is possible for him to know. That is point one.

Point two: most of the great writers pay scant attention to what others have said. The more we go at this, and we are now working on the actual controversy, the fewer instances in which we can find, on difficult and important subjects, anything like a rationally respectable joining of issues. And where we do find that, the debate has not gone on. The thing that should be the glory of the human mind—to stand face to face when men differ, with detachment, without passion, to understand one another, argue, hear the argument and refute it—this thing, for which by the way we have a model in the disputations of the middle ages, this wonderful thing has not gone on. As a result, for example, on the great subject of the freedom of the will, about which more has been written than on any other aspect of freedom, the debate is a relatively poor thing. The reasons are not given beyond the first level.

Assertion, then reason, then some question about that reason, and perhaps a second level of reason, and it stops. It actually isn't going further, and you know that there's much more to say, and it would have been said if the debate had been conducted well.

I say this only to indicate that any careful look at the history of thought will show, I think, that a great deal of work has to be done to history, to the historical materials, to make them useful to the human mind. In their raw existence, they're not useful; they are only confusing. A great deal of hard work has to be done to make them useful, if their use is the pursuit of the truth. If the whole of thought so far is to enable those of us alive who can think to think better, which is what it should do, then the materials we have from the past must be greatly purified and refined. And this is a task. We've been a small group working for ten years on freedom; if you took the full range of ideas, think of how much work would have to be done to get the history of thought refined into an examined condition where it could yield some guidance to anyone who wants to think constructively and creatively today.

Obviously this last point has no relation to college teaching. You can't do this in college. It takes too long. My own guess is that the best you can do in the college teaching of philosophy is what I suggested a Catholic college could do. And the best thing you can do in a secular college is to read the Great Books of philosophy or law, with the other great books, just in the hope that the student at the end of four years will understand some questions, face perhaps some issues, and look for the answers during the rest of his life. If there is any other way of doing it, if there is any other way of cultivating the liberal arts, the skills of learning, than by reading the Great Books, I certainly would welcome it. If it could be done better in some other way I would applaud it.

All I can say, as my own conclusion is that I simply don't know of any other way in which it can be done as well, or done at all.

Thank you.



“Huxley preached a humility content to learn from nature. But the new sceptic is so humble that he doubts if he can even learn...”

We are on the road to producing a race of men too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table.”

—G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Thanks, Max.

I really enjoy these. They make me appreciate even more something I read in our local paper. The television writer/critic for the last 22 years is retiring. He's only 55. He had his left lung removed two years and it has returned as stage 4, metastasis cancer in the other lung which his doctors have been able to contain—"so far." He wrote this morning that he has decided to "concentrate on what really matters: my wife, my family, my friends, my faith, my writing, my reading. (As someone once said, eventually you realize you're reading against the clock.)" My set of "great books" sits beside me as I write this, not three feet to my left in a special book-case. I realize that I, too, am "reading against the clock." That's what makes these books and this internet service so important to me. At least I know I'm reading the very best while "reading against the clock."

Pardon my long-windedness.
Peace and best wishes,
Graves Enck

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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