



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
CHICAGO

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## “THE CHICAGO FIGHT”

Mortimer Adler

Part 2 of 2

In the final issues of the *Maroon* that academic year, Barden wrote an editorial on intolerance, in which he characterized as a specious form of tolerance the view that everything is a matter of opinion, one opinion being as good as another, even when they are contrary or contradictory. By way of rejoinder, Professor Gideonse, after, ridiculing the flight into the past of the neo-Aristotelians, reminded everyone that “not the least of the university’s many distinguished contributions was that of the so-called ‘Chicago School’ of philosophy, identified with the names of Dewey, Mead, Tufts, Moore, and Ames.” That, he said, represented the main tradition of this university.

Gideonse was correct. By the same token, the resolution adopted by the college was wide of the mark in asserting that the university had never in its history been committed to a relatively homogeneous doctrine or point of view. The “Chicago School” of philosophy did represent the main tradition of the university from the beginning of the century until Hutchins became president. The empiricism, pragmatism, and relativism of Dewey, his associates, and followers, were not confined to the teachings of the Philosophy Department; they gave inspiration and direction to the leading professors in other fields, resulting in a relatively homogeneous doctrine and spirit diffused throughout the university as a whole. In a retrospective article that I wrote for *Harper’s Magazine* in 1941,

entitled “The Chicago School,” I pointed out that Chicago’s school of thought gradually came to dominate the work of other institutions—in philosophy and education, in biology, social science, and religion. “Chicago had, in its first long period,” I wrote, “both homogeneity in itself and affinity with the general trend in American culture. It was the larger community in microcosm.”

This led me to ask why anyone should have wished to reform the University of Chicago. Was it not everything that a university should be, doing everything a university should do? “The answer,” I said, “is simply that its unity had been achieved too quickly and at too great a cost. The price must be measured in terms of the things which Chicago, and American culture generally, had been willing to give up, had, in fact, renounced as outmoded. At its *very* center, exercising centrifugal force, was a hard core of negations and exclusions,” such as the denial of metaphysics and theology as independent of empirical science, the denial of moral values transcending adaptation to environment and escaping relativity of time and place, the denial of intellectual discipline in education, and so on.

“If the positive points in the Chicago movement had been temperately affirmed, truth might have been increased, even transformed, by their addition; but there would probably be no record today of any Chicago School of Thought. Given a sharp, negative twist, they not only created a school of thought but also unified its members in a crusading movement against the old and supposedly outworn. Once remove the negations and make the contrary supposition—that the old is not outworn, but must be integrated with the new—and you will see how hollow at its center was Chicago’s unity before Hutchins came along.”

I then went on to explain that “what Hutchins attempted to establish at Chicago was not a new school of thought, just as exclusive in its own way as its predecessor.” The faculty misinterpreted him in terms of their own extremism. They charged him with wanting “nothing but Thomism,” “nothing but principles,” or “nothing but the past” where before there had been “nothing but Dewey’s brand of pragmatism,” “nothing but facts,” or “nothing but the present.” On the contrary, Hutchins sought to relate science, philosophy, and theology harmoniously without sacrificing the autonomy of each. He wished to be contemporary and American in education without promoting militant modernism or cultural isolationism.

“In the past ten years there have been numerous references to ‘the neo-Scholastic movement at Chicago,’ ‘Chicago Thomism,’ ‘Aristotelianism on the Midway,’ ‘the revival of classicism,’ ‘the return

to the Middle Ages’—all suggestive of the fact that Chicago had become the center of another orthodoxy, the seat of an opposite school of thought. That, however, is simply not the fact. . . . I do not believe that Hutchins ever wished it to be. It was not merely that he and his associates in reform were vastly outnumbered by the dissident voices on the faculty. . . . The truth is rather that Hutchins fought the old school not to replace it by another, but to place its positive contributions, shorn of their ‘nothing-but’ exaggerations, in the perspective of the whole European tradition. Justice could be done to modernity without throwing ancient wisdom out of court.”

Looking back over those ten trouble-filled yet intellectually exciting years, I summed them up by saying that “the Chicago Fight now plays the role . . . once played by the Chicago School.” The extraordinary intellectual vigor of those ten years resulted from the fact that the parties to important issues concerning education, the organization of knowledge, and the structure of the university were “willing to see the fight through, wherever the chips fell.” They did not “run away from trouble by insisting upon academic dignity, by hiding behind the false face of academic politeness. Dispensing with kid gloves and Queensberry rules, the discussion turned into something of a public brawl, with all sorts of kibitzers on the sidelines mixing in. But, however lamentable some aspects of the controversy now seem, the Chicago Fight, like the Chicago School, performed the type of service which a university owes to the community.”

Comparing those ten years at Chicago with my previous ten years at Columbia, and also in terms of what I knew about academic life at other universities, I could applaud, without qualification, “the exceptional character of Chicago’s intellectual vitality.”

“. . . there has been more real tangling over basic issues at Chicago than has occurred at a dozen other places during the same time, or at some places during their whole existence. . . . Their faculties may harbor differences of opinions about fundamentals, but you would never know it by listening to the talk at the faculty club, reading the student paper, or detecting signs of strife in administrative decisions. From this usual state of affairs, Chicago differs almost in kind, not degree. The campus has been a seething ferment these past ten years, and everybody has been involved from the president down to the janitors—the students as well as the faculty.”

The phase of the Chicago fight that I have just described centered mainly on issues concerning the aims and methods of general education at the college level. But implicit in that controversy were

more fundamental issues concerning the hierarchy of disciplines in the organization of knowledge and the structure of a university—questions about the relation of philosophy, and also theology, to the empirical sciences, questions about the architectonic position of metaphysics, questions about the validity of ethical principles and the objectivity of moral standards. These issues were peripheral or in the background of the interchange between Barden and Gideonse, in the Carlson-Adler debate, and in the jousting of student groups who aligned themselves with the Aristotelians or the social scientists. They came to the fore with the publication in 1936 of Hutchins' *Higher Learning in America*—based on the Storrs Lectures he delivered at Yale the previous year—and they occupied the center of the stage in the final rounds of the Chicago fight... .

In the third chapter of *The Higher Learning in America*, Hutchins called attention to the distinction between permanent and progressive studies, educational content which remains the same generation after generation as contrasted with educational content which changes as new discoveries are made. The distinction had been made by William Whewell a hundred years earlier when, as master of Trinity College, Cambridge, he defended retaining permanent studies as the core of liberal education. Employing this distinction, Hutchins identified the reading of Great Books and training in the liberal arts as the permanent studies to be given a central place in any college that had liberal education as its objective. Progressive studies are not to be excluded from the curriculum, but they should be pursued in the light that the permanent studies can shed on them. As Whewell had said, “the progressive studies which education embraces must rest upon the permanent studies which it necessarily includes. The former must be its superstructure, the latter, its foundation.”

Praising the Great Books as “a part, and a large part, of the permanent studies,” Hutchins quoted Nicholas Murray Butler’s remark that “only the scholar can realize how little that is being said and thought in the modern world is in any sense new.” Why, Hutchins then asked, “should this insight be confined to scholars? Every educated person should know the colossal triumph of the Greeks and Romans and the great thinkers of the Middle Ages. If every man were educated—and why should he not be?—our people would not fall so easily a prey to the latest nostrums in economics, in politics, and, I may add, in education.”

The Great Books should be an essential part of everyone’s education “because it is impossible to understand any subject or comprehend the contemporary world without them. . . . Four years spent

partly in reading, discussing, and digesting books of such importance would, therefore, contribute equally to preparation for specialized study and to general education of a terminal variety.” In addition, Hutchins pointed out, it would provide the basis for understanding modern science, and would save us from “the false starts, the backing and filling, the wildness, the hysteria, the confusion of modern thought and the modern world [which] result from the loss of what has been thought and done by earlier ages.”

The complementary part of the permanent studies for which Hutchins appealed consisted of “grammar, or the rules of reading,” together with “rhetoric and logic, or the rules of writing, speaking, and reasoning.” Summarizing his idea of general education as “a course of study consisting of the greatest books of the Western world and the arts of reading, writing, thinking, and speaking, together with mathematics, the best exemplar of the processes of human reason,” he concluded by saying that “all the needs of general education in America seem to be satisfied by this curriculum,” and by asking, “What, then, are the objections to it?”

Hutchins dismissed the objection that this course of study is “too difficult for students, who can read or who can be taught to do so. . . . No,” he continued, “the students can do the work if the faculties will let them. Will the faculties let them? I doubt it. The professors of today have been brought up differently. Not all of them have read all the books they would have to teach. Not all of them are ready to change the habits of their lives. Meanwhile they are bringing up their successors in the way they were brought up, so that the next crop will have the habits they have had themselves. And the love of money, a misconception of democracy, a false notion of progress, a distorted idea of utility, and the anti-intellectualism to which all these lead conspire to confirm their conviction that no disturbing change is needed.”

William Whewell and Nicholas Murray Butler may have cherished the same idea of liberal education that Hutchins was trying to promote; they may have had as little hope as he of persuading those whom they knew to hold contrary views; but unlike Hutchins, they did not tell those whom they had little hope of persuading that it was their own intellectual and moral defects which stood in the way. No wonder that Hutchins’ message was received with as much equanimity as would be produced by a shower of barbs and nettles.

The final chapter of *The Higher Learning in America* criticized the modern university for failings that its faculties regarded as virtues rather than defects. A graduate student at a modern uni-

versity, Hutchins wrote, finds “a vast number of departments and professional schools all anxious to give him the latest information about a tremendous variety of subjects, some important, some trivial, some indifferent. He would find ... that all these subjects and fractions of subjects must be regarded as equally valuable. . . . He would find a complete and thoroughgoing disorder.” What is worse, Hutchins declared, the university takes pride in this disorder and has “resisted attempts to correct it by calling them undemocratic and authoritarian.” And the reason why disorder is the chief characteristic of the higher learning is that there is no ordering principle in it:

“The modern university may be compared with an encyclopedia. The encyclopedia contains many truths. It may consist of nothing else. But its unity can be found only in its alphabetical arrangement. The university is in much the same case. It has departments running from art to zoology; but neither the students nor the professors know what is the relation of one departmental truth to another, or what the relation of departmental truths to those in the domain of another department may be.”

Hutchins then contrasted this picture with the hierarchical structure of the medieval university in which theology was queen of the sciences and philosophy was her handmaiden. Theology provided the medieval university with its principle of unity and of order. In ordering the truths that dealt with the relation of man to God, the relation of man to man, and the relation of man to nature, it also placed the three faculties of the university—theology, law, and medicine—in an order that subordinated medicine to law and both to theology. Theology, Hutchins admitted, could no longer be appealed to as the source of unity and order. He proposed that we go back to the Greeks and employ metaphysics, as they conceived it, to perform this function. Concerned with first principles, ultimate causes, and the basic categories involved in the understanding of any subject matter, metaphysics can serve as “the ordering and proportioning discipline. It is in the light of metaphysics that the social sciences, dealing with man and man, and the physical sciences, dealing with man and nature, take shape and illuminate one another. ... Metaphysics, then, as the highest science, ordered the thought of the Greek world as theology ordered that of the Middle Ages. One or the other must be called upon to order the thought of modern times. If we cannot appeal to theology, we must turn to metaphysics. Without theology or metaphysics a unified university cannot exist.”

Hutchins’ reiterated disclaimer that he was not “arguing for any specific theological or metaphysical system” did not save him from

the justifiable suspicion that he had one secretly in mind. That, however, was not the main disquietude on the part of those who opposed him. Even if he had not proposed that metaphysics take the place that theology once occupied; even if he had admitted that theology failed to unify the medieval university on points of doctrine; even if he had used the word “philosophy” instead of that troublesome word “metaphysics” to name a mode of inquiry and a body of truths distinct from the whole range of empirical sciences, the reaction would have been essentially the same, though it might have been less violent. In the eyes of his contemporaries, he would still have been guilty of the twofold heresy of calling for a hierarchy of disciplines in the higher learning with one sovereign over all the rest, and of giving that sovereign place to philosophy as regulative of the empirical sciences and other fields of scholarship.

In fact, if Hutchins had done no more than insist that empirical science is *not* the only valid knowledge to which we can appeal, that the scientific method is *not* the only reliable mode of inquiry capable of achieving approximations to the truth, and that philosophy, having a method of its own, is an organized body of respectable knowledge, *not* an assortment of personal opinions, and is capable of discovering and establishing truths *not* attainable by science, such pronouncements would have been as passionately rejected by the scientists in our universities and by most of the philosophers as well. Their passions would have been further aroused if that error were compounded by saying that philosophy can answer questions that science cannot answer, and by declaring that the questions philosophy can answer are more fundamental and more important—more fundamental because they are concerned, in the speculative perspective, with the ultimate features of reality; and more important because, in the sphere of action, they are concerned with values, with good and bad, or right and wrong.

Harry Gideonse, the professor of economics who several years earlier had tangled with editor John Barden in the columns of the *Daily Maroon*, spearheaded the faculty opposition at the University of Chicago. His critique of *The Higher Learning in America*, which he delivered orally on the campus, appeared in book form in 1937. Its title, *The Higher Learning in a Democracy*, plainly implied that Hutchins’ views were antidemocratic. Hutchins himself had anticipated that this would be said about views that called for a hierarchical ordering of the various fields of learning instead of treating them all as of equal importance.

Gideonse’s critique began by asking whether the unification of the university is to be voluntary or mandatory. If voluntary, should it not be developed by the community of scholars employing their

diverse methods of research? If mandatory, who will impose it? The tendency of these questions was, of course, to imply that the unification would be imposed from above—by Hutchins and by means of philosophy, not by the scientific method. Hence, in the name of science and democracy, Hutchins' proposals must be rejected.

Gideonse did not believe that Hutchins had no particular system of metaphysics or philosophical doctrine in mind. Hutchins kept on reiterating that by philosophy he did not mean the doctrine of any particular philosopher, any more than he would be referring to *Newton's* physics when he spoke of physics or to *Lyell's* geology when he spoke of geology. Nevertheless, Gideonse and others charged him with trying to promote the philosophy of Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas. Even though they had considerable justification for the allegation, the point had little importance, since Gideonse's main concern was that, in a modern university and in a democratic society, the only kind of knowledge that can and should be respected as valid is the kind achieved by the methods of investigative science. Therefore, philosophy, in Gideonse's view, must be precisely what Hutchins repeatedly said philosophy was *not*—subjective opinions, personal insights, even wild conjectures.

Where Hutchins proposed that metaphysics or speculative philosophy should provide the ordering and unifying principles for the higher learning, Gideonse countered by asserting that "the true scholar finds his unifying principles in the . . . methods of science." It is these "that unite him with his associates into a community of scholars and scientists." The role that philosophy should be playing in a modern university, according to Gideonse, is that of handmaiden to science, confining itself (as positivistic and analytic philosophers were currently recommending) to therapeutic clarifications or methodological subtleties, and definitely eschewing any attempt to achieve knowledge of the world that, as Hutchins conceived philosophy, would be as valid in its own right as scientific knowledge was in its, yet independent of science and unaffected by advances or alterations in scientific thought. While refusing to acknowledge that philosophical questions can be answered by knowledge rather than opinion, Gideonse nevertheless did concede that philosophy might make a positive contribution through clarifying the values by which we live.

In a number of addresses to the faculty at Chicago, Bob Hutchins tried to overcome Gideonse's misunderstanding or misrepresentation of his views, without yielding an inch on the main tenets of his position....



Nothing he said, however, mollified his adversaries or moved the controversy to a plane where the issues might be resolved by rational debate. The Chicago fight soon spread from the university to the nation. As more and more reviews of *The Higher Learning in America* appeared in popular as well as professional journals, the adverse criticisms being uttered in Chicago were echoed across the land. The biggest gun fired off against Hutchins—a review written by John Dewey, which appeared in two issues of the *Social Frontier* in January, 1937—was the only one that elicited a published rejoinder from Bob, except for a summary response to all the adverse reviews, which he wrote for *The Nation* in 1940.


Dewey's criticism contained the same oft-repeated charges—President Hutchins' "authoritarianism," his "contempt for science," his appeal to "fixed and eternal truths." Bob's reply, entitled "Grammar, Rhetoric, and Mr. Dewey," began by saying that "Mr. Dewey has stated my position in such a way as to lead me to think that I cannot write, and has stated his own in such a way as to make me suspect that I cannot read. . . . Mr. Dewey says (1) that I look to Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas; (2) that I am antiscientific; (3) that I am withdrawing from the world; and (4) that I am authoritarian."

Hutchins then went on to answer each of these charges by citing passages in *The Higher Learning in America* which refuted them. He pointed out, for example, that "the words 'fixed' and 'eternal' are Mr. Dewey's; I do not apply them to principles or truths in my book"; and he ended up by saying; "Mr. Dewey has suggested that only a defective education can account for some of my views. I am moved to inquire whether the explanation of some of his may not be that he thinks he is still fighting nineteenth-century German philosophy."

Dewey, not Hutchins, had the last word in this interchange. Declaring that he had originally thought Hutchins' book "a work of great significance," he now reported a change of mind. In his judgment, Mr. Hutchins' reply avoided the main issues. "I cannot find in his reply any indication that he either repudiates the position I attributed to him or is willing to defend it. . . . I must ask his forgiveness if I took his book too seriously."

The furor at the University of Chicago and, in the rest of the country, the controversy about what was going on at the university, had reached proportions that, in the judgment of the editors of *Fortune*, merited extensive coverage in their magazine. They commissioned John Chamberlain to write the article. Chamberlain's confessed difficulty with certain aspects of the Hutchins position did not seri-

ously impair his effort to present a fair picture of the two sides in the controversy at Chicago. His *Fortune* article, which appeared late in 1937, reported, for example, the view, on one side, that “science, no matter what its glories, can’t advise you on your likes and dislikes; it cannot give you a scale of values. It can tell you *how* to fight a war, but it cannot tell you whether or not you *ought* to have a war.”

This he balanced against the view on the other side by saying, “Even those who are willing to admit Hutchins’ preoccupation with values, with the *oughts* in life, are unwilling to grant the final authority to the Aristotelian tradition to define values. They insist that no values can be fixed, [and argue] that a valid modern philosophy need not reckon with ideas as they are expressed in the books of ancient and medieval times.” 

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