



THE ORDER OF LEARNING¹

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Part 1 of 2

I. Introduction

I am deeply appreciative of the honor conferred upon me by your invitation to address you this evening. It is a great privilege to be able to attend two meetings of the Catholic Philosophical Association in the same year. I have been attending the Christmas meetings of the eastern division for the last seven years, and I think you will realize with what background and what sincerity I can pay you this compliment: I have never before seen so perfectly constructed a program—so unified, so comprehensive, so balanced. The officers and members of this division are to be congratulated. I wish they would come East some time and arrange our meetings for us.

¹ An address delivered at the dinner meeting of the Western Division of the American Catholic Philosophical Association, in San Francisco, April 19, 1941; and here published as delivered, except for the appended footnotes.

I have a private reason for pleasure in the perfection of the program you have just completed. When I first read the announcement of the papers to be given during these two days, I was embarrassed by the fact that there seemed to be nothing left to talk about on the subject of education. It looked as if the only appropriate thing to do at this dinner was to get up and say Amen. But then I found another angle from which to view the proceedings and my place in them. Just because the program was so beautifully rounded and balanced, I could feel relaxed about my own final part in it. The program was so balanced, no harm would be done if I was unbalanced. All the major points having been made, all the important themes being covered, I could feel free to do a minor and unimportant job. I could indulge myself in a little tirade, expressing one of my pet prejudices about contemporary education.

The theme I have chosen to discuss is the order of learning. *I am going to deal with the means of education, not with the ends.* Nor am I going to consider the means in every way—but only with respect to their ordination to one another. I am concerned with the order of studies, on the one hand, and with the order of a teacher's activities to those of his students, on the other. The question I propose to answer is: Given ideally perfect ends, how shall the basic means be ordered? But even this question is too large for treatment after dinner, so I must restrict the matters to be considered somewhat further.

I shall limit myself to purely natural education—that is, education defined in terms of natural and temporal happiness, as its ultimate end, and the natural virtues, as its proximate ends. I shall neglect religious education entirely, not because it is negligible—far from it, it is the least negligible part of education—but for two reasons which I wish to state: first, because it is beyond my competence to treat of such matters; and second, because it is beyond the province of strictly philosophical discussion to consider such matters, regardless of the personal competence of an individual who may combine in his person the gifts of both the philosopher and the theologian. One may combine the gifts, but the gifts are never the same, and should never be confused.

I should like to take just a moment, in digression, to comment on two phrases that have been used during these meetings. One is “Catholic philosophy of education,” and the other is “Philosophy of Catholic education.” Let me comment first on “Catholic philosophy of education.”

The ends and means of religious education are supernaturally revealed and supernaturally instituted. The ends are known by the moral theologian, not the moral philosopher; the means belong to the sacramental office of the priest, not the secular office of the teacher. If we wish to avoid violating the basic Thomistic distinction between philosophy and theology, between the spheres of reason and faith, we must, in speaking of the philosophy of education, restrict ourselves to purely natural education, natural both as to ends and to means. There is a Catholic philosophy of education only in the same sense in which any other branch of philosophy can be Catholic: not in the peculiar status of any of its principles or conclusions, for these are all the work of reason, achieved by purely natural knowing, and as such they are logically independent of the articles of any faith. No, a philosophy is Catholic only in the order of efficient causality, not the order of formal causality, only in the historical and psychological order of its becoming, not in the epistemic order of its being. We know, as a matter of historical fact, that certain truths which reason is able to know, were not known by the great ancient pagans, and were only discovered later by the great Christian theologians. This is our factual basis for supposing that the light of faith, which the great Christian thinkers possessed, functioned psychologically to direct and help reason accomplish a work of discovery with respect to matters which nevertheless fall entirely within its province. It follows, therefore, that once a Catholic mind, possessing the virtue of faith as well as the power of reason, is able to discover these basic rational truths, they can become the property of any mind, even if it lack the gift of faith—for they are reason's property, and as such are proper to man's nature. Truths which pagans could not discover, can be taught to, and learned by, pagans, once Christians have discovered them. Philosophy can be called Catholic, then, only in the order of discovery, not in its logical structure, for as philosophy its ultimate principles are all rational and natural.

So much for a Catholic philosophy of education. Now let me comment briefly on the question whether there is any philosophy of Catholic education. I suspect the answer must be negative. Catholic education can differ from a non-Catholic education founded on naturally true principles only by virtue of supernatural truths added thereto—not *merely* added, of course, but effecting a profound transformation of the whole. In so far as it differs, the consideration of such education must belong to the theologian, not the philosopher.

There is one further restriction on my discussion this evening which I should like to announce. I shall neglect moral education

entirely—a much more difficult, and also a more important, topic than intellectual education, to which I shall confine myself.² I note that one of your papers was on whether virtue (moral, I assume, must have been meant) can be taught. I hope the answer was clearly negative. As I understand the essence of teaching, it simply cannot be the adequate or effective instrument for forming moral virtue. Plato and Aristotle were clear about this, and clearly in agreement. The intellectual virtues are preeminently teachable, as the moral virtues are not. With respect to them, we should be able to solve the problem of means, as no one yet has with respect to the development of moral virtues, if ever a solution will be reached. And so I address myself to the problem—interesting because narrow and solvable—of the means to intellectual virtue: the order of studies which aim to cause the perfection of the mind.

The intellectual virtues are the proximate ends of all truly *liberal* or *intellectual* education. (I shall use these two words interchangeably.) Even here there is one last restriction. Prudence belongs with the moral virtues. It is formed as they are, not by teaching or by school work, but somehow mysteriously by practice, under guidance, in many ways. Hence, I am left with four virtues, divided into the arts, on the one hand, and the three speculative virtues (understanding, science, and wisdom) on the other. And here certainly wisdom is the highest end and the controlling principle in any consideration of the means.

I think this problem is something Catholic educators should consider. I say “Catholic educators” because they alone today rightly understand the ends of liberal or intellectual education to be the four virtues I have named. They alone know this, and know what the virtues are. In this, they stand in sharp contrast to their secular colleagues who in the last hundred years have so misconceived the

² I have elsewhere treated of the relation of the moral to the intellectual virtues in education—in a paper on Character and Intelligence, soon to be published, I hope. In this paper, I have tried to show that, although the intellectual virtues, with the exception of prudence, can be possessed, according to St. Thomas, quite apart from the possession of the moral virtues, it is very unlikely that they can be acquired by a person who is not rightly ordered to the end of learning by prior possession of the moral virtues. This would be true *even* if the natural man existed. How much more so is it true in the case of fallen human nature, which must be helped by grace to acquire even the natural moral virtues in their perfection and integrity. Although moral virtue, natural and infused, may be prerequisite to the successful pursuit of learning, these conditions being given, the problem of how to pursue learning successfully still remains. That is the problem, the only problem, with which the present discussion is concerned; and it is essentially the same problem for Catholics and non-Catholics.

aims and ends of liberal education that it has almost vanished from the scene. But though our secular colleagues are wrong about the ends of liberal education, they are often quite sound about the means—especially about the order of teaching as an art of using the means—and this is most true, you will be surprised to hear me say, in the case of the extreme progressive educators who have unwittingly returned to some ancient truths about educational method. They do not use the means for good educational results, because they misdirect them through ignorance or misconception of the ends. But Catholic educators can, I think, be charged with an opposite fault: knowing the right ends, they frequently fail to achieve them because they misuse the means, because they violate the nature of the learning process itself.

I warned you this might become a tirade, expressing a pet peeve of mine. You may remember an article I published in *The Commonweal* several years ago, asking “Can Catholic Education be Criticized?” My answer was Yes—not about the ends, but about the means. Let me repeat here the conclusion I then formulated:

I can understand why a Catholic educator might be impervious to any critic who attacked the ends of Catholic education, because somehow these ends are implicated in the central truths of the Christian religion, and thus there is a dogmatic confirmation for the conviction of reason about them. But certainly this is not the case with the means! The truth of Catholicism in religion and philosophy, for example, is no warrant for the efficacy or intrinsic excellence of the way religion and philosophy are taught in Catholic schools. Only the liberal arts can provide the standard for judging excellence in teaching, for measuring the efficiency of educational means, or for inventing others; and the liberal arts are neither pagan nor Christian but human.

I am deeply concerned about this point, deeply disturbed by seeing the miscarriage of education in Catholic institutions, precisely because I know their ends are right. Furthermore, is not their fault a worse one than the fault of the secular educators? Is there not more excuse for the secular educators being mistaken about the ends, than for Catholic educators being mistaken about the means? Let me explain why I think so.

I said before that secular educators, especially the radical progressive group, were singularly right and eminently sound on many points concerning the means. I had in mind the fundamental soundness of the project-method (though I abhor the name), the method which stresses activity on the part of the learner as indis-

pensable, which emphasizes the great importance of understanding the problem before knowing the answers, which places the acquirement of skills before the mastery of subject-matters in the domain of basic general education.

Now I say that all of these right procedures appear to be radical innovations only because they were forgotten or corrupted by the decadent classical education of the last century, against which progressive education rose in justifiable rebellion. Truly, all these procedures are founded on ancient insights about the order of teaching and learning, insights which every Catholic educator must possess if he understands the nature of man and of human teaching, according to the principles of the philosophy he generally affirms. Let me briefly enumerate some of these points. *The Catholic educator knows:*

(1) *The difference between intellectual habit and sensitive memory.* Hence he knows that verbal proficiency, which is a work of sensitive memory, must not be confused with the habit of understanding.

(2) *That habits of understanding can be formed only by intellectual acts—acts on the part of the student, not simply acts by the teacher.* Hence he knows that the teacher is always a secondary cause of learning, never a primary cause, for the primary cause must always be an act on the part of the learner's own intellect.

(3) *That the intellect depends on sense and imagination, and also that it can be swayed and colored by the motion of the passions.* Hence he knows that the discipline of the liberal arts must precede the process of acquiring the speculative virtues, for it is the liberal arts which rectify the intellect in its pursuit of truth—the arts of grammar and logic which protect the intellect against the deceptions of verbal and other symbolization, and all the wayward imagery of sense; the arts of logic and rhetoric, which guard against the incursions of passion, and the coloring of thought by irrelevant emotion.

(4) *That the intellectual virtues are always a mean state between vicious extremes of saying too much or saying too little—dogmatic affirmations in excess, or skeptical denials in defect.* Hence he knows that truth is always an eminent synthesis of false extremes, a sober resolution of false issues made by extreme positions; he knows that the truth can be genuinely possessed only by a mind which sees the truth always as a correc-

tion of manifold and divers errors, and never by the mind which tries to be alone with the truth in an artificially antiseptic environment.

The Catholic educator knows all these things, because they are fundamental truths in his philosophy of man. But, unlike his secular colleague, who may not acknowledge these truths at all, or certainly not know them so deeply, but who nevertheless seems to practice according to their meaning, *the Catholic educator, who knows them, often violates them in practice by educational methods which*

(1) Put a premium on verbal memory instead of intellectual habit.

(2) Proceed as if the teacher were the only active cause of learning, and as if the learner could be entirely passive.

(3) Neglect or wrongly subordinate the liberal arts to a supposed mastery of subject-matter.

(4) Try to do the impossible—namely, to give the students genuine possession of the truth without ever really perplexing them first by the problems or issues which the truth resolves—and this requires a vital experience of error, for genuine perplexity is usually killed along with the dummy opponents who have been made into straw men for quick demolition.

Before I proceed now to a brief statement of the order of learning, based upon these truths, let me anticipate one objection I have received from Catholic educators *as to means*. I am told that Catholic education must give its college graduates a fundamental body of truths for the guidance of their lives. I am told that this necessitates the covering of much ground. You can guess my response. I simply ask what is the point of covering ground, if the students' feet never touch it, if they never learn through independent exercise to walk by themselves, with head erect and unafraid of all intellectual opposition and difficulty. What is the point of memorizing truths, if they can really guide us only when they are genuinely possessed, if they can protect us from falsehood only to the extent that we understand them as fully refuting errors—real, live errors, not dummy ones concocted for the purposes of an easy victory. I would feel happier about the graduates of Catholic colleges if they really understood a few truths well—understood them as solving problems which vigorously challenge the mind and perplex it—rather than be able to recite, from merely verbal memory, a whole

catechism of philosophical answers to problems they did not really understand or take seriously. I would be happier if they were merely disciplined in the pursuit of truth and in the rejection of error, rather than be, as they now are in so many cases, unable to give an account of what they know because it is known by memory rather than possessed by intellectual habit.³

I shall proceed now to a brief discussion of the order of learning in the field of the intellectual virtues. I shall, first, consider the ordination of the liberal arts to the speculative subject-matters. I shall, then, consider the methods of teaching the speculative subject-matters. And, finally, I shall draw some conclusions and summarize my insights in terms of the state of philosophy in contemporary culture—for the present condition of philosophy is not unrelated to the way it is taught and learned.

II. *Art and Subject-matter*

My thesis here is simply that mastery of the liberal arts must precede the mastery of the fundamental subject-matters, which constitute the matter of the speculative virtues. Though wisdom comes first in the natural order of the virtues—graded according to their intrinsic excellence—the arts, least of the intellectual virtues, come first in the temporal order, the order of human development.

³ The point I am here making does not deny that it may be useful *in some way* for Catholic students—or, for that matter, any other students—to be “indoctrinated” with philosophical truths they do not really understand and, therefore, do not really possess. Truths, thus acquired, do not constitute knowledge, subjectively, but only *right opinion*. If a person, for one reason or another, cannot attain knowledge, it is better that he have right opinion than be ignorant or in error—for right opinion can serve as a guide to action, even if it fails utterly to perfect the intellect. But the utility of right opinion, which may justify the sort of indoctrination that goes on in many Catholic institutions, does not justify the process of indoctrination itself in the sphere of liberal education, aiming specifically at the perfection of the intellect. For, in the first place, the method of indoctrination, if condoned, is likely to result in the imposition of wrong opinions—as Catholic educators are the first to realize when they survey the work of secular institutions; and, in the second place, the method of indoctrination violates the very nature of liberal education by substituting opinion, right or wrong, for knowledge. Truth held on the authority of anyone except God (through Divine Revelation, or through the Church as His instrument) is not knowledge: strictly speaking, even revealed truth, about matters exceeding reason’s competence, belongs to faith (a mean between knowledge and opinion); certainly if the matters fall within reason’s sphere, and the authority is human, truth so held is mere opinion. But the aim of liberal education is the perfection of the intellect by the genuine possession of the habitus of knowledge. The utility of right opinion for certain practical purposes cannot, therefore, excuse failures in liberal education.

You may tell me that this order is now generally observed: that logic is a basic course in all Catholic colleges, and that it is a discipline preparatory for the study of the basic subject-matters. May I disagree, not with the facts, but with such interpretation of them? Logic can be taken, or given, in one of two ways: *either* as a speculative science itself, albeit a science in the second intention, in contrast to metaphysics and physics as sciences of the real (and hence in the first intention); *or* as one of the liberal arts, an organon, a body of rules for the regulation and rectification of the mind, not in itself, for in itself the human intellect is absolutely infallible, and needs no art at all, but rather in its dependence upon sense and imagination, and in its subjection to passion. (I am saying that logic as a science, may deal with pure thought; but logic, as an art, is not an art of thinking, of pure intellectual activity, for such does not exist; it is always an art, necessarily conjoined with grammar and rhetoric, which regulates the operations of the intellectual imagination, thinking with symbols and against the impulse of passion.)

When logic is considered as an art, it cannot be divorced, you see, from the other two liberal arts of grammar and rhetoric. The three arts form a trinity, and each of the arts becomes corrupted and ineffective—an empty and meaningless routine—when separated from the others. This, by the way, is precisely what has happened to the liberal arts during the last four centuries. And scholasticism, with its arid logic, divorced from grammar and rhetoric, is as much to blame for this sad state of affairs, as the most anti-intellectual movements in education.

The teaching of logic in Catholic colleges—as *a science*,—is not a liberal discipline. The text-book logic which is taught, as a set of formulae without practice in the intellectual operations to which they are relevant, does not discipline the mind in writing, speaking, and listening. What good is it to know all the kinds of propositions, if a student cannot discover how many propositions are being expressed in a complicated sentence, and how they are related? What good to know all the principles of the syllogism if the student cannot recognize the congeries of syllogisms, or reasonings, that occur in a paragraph expressing a complicated argument? The proof of my point here is very simple. Though they are given a course in the science of logic, as their secular fellows are not, the graduates of Catholic colleges cannot read or write any better than their secular fellows. If they had been liberally disciplined, if the liberal arts had been acquired by them through years of exercise in their practices, then they would be vastly superior in the performance of all these

liberal operations.

Furthermore, logic as a science is completely out of order when it is put first in the course of philosophical studies. Logic the organon, which really means the three arts of the trivium in complex conjunction, does come first; but logic the science comes last—even after metaphysics, after all the sciences of the real—precisely because second intentions follow first intentions, are derived from them, and depend upon them.

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