



THE AIMS OF EDUCATION

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Six years ago I had the honor of addressing my fellow Yale men on the Higher Learning in America. I was surprised to find that these lectures did not have the effect they were intended to produce. Instead, all the movements they were designed to arrest, all the attitudes they were calculated to change, went rushing onward, in the case of the movements, or became more firmly entrenched, in the case of the attitudes.

I attacked triviality, and forty-two students enrolled in the Oklahoma University short course for drum majors.

I attacked vocationalism, and the University of California announced a course in cosmetology, saying, "The profession of beautician is the fastest growing in this state."

I deplored a curriculum of obsolescent information, and one of America's most distinguished sociologists announced that our information was increasing so rapidly that in order to get time to pour it all into our students we should have to prolong adolescence

at least until age forty-five.

I asserted that higher education was primarily intellectual, and the President of the New York State College for Teachers said, "Education is not even primarily intellectual, certainly not chiefly intellectual. It is the process by which the emotions are socialized."

I lamented the confusion that besets American education, and the President of a highly confused and very large college announced that chaos was a good thing. Though I should prefer chaos to an order imposed by force, I had never supposed that chaos was an ideal toward which all right-thinking men should strive. Chaos had always seemed to me something you tried to get out of. I had always thought that what we wanted, both in politics and education, was a rational order, rationally arrived at.

One professor accidentally agreed with me. He made the following outrageous remarks in a book of his own: "There will always remain," he said, "certain permanent values which education must cultivate, such as intellectual honesty, love of truth, ability to think clearly, moral qualities." The fact that he was from Teachers College, Columbia, and could be assumed to be only teasing, did not save him. He was sharply rebuked by a professor from Ohio State University who said that here he must "part company with the author of this indisputably significant volume, for the suspicion grows that the author is still something of an absolutist." The author actually wanted education to cultivate intellectual honesty, the love of truth, the ability to think clearly, and moral qualities.

Now I will not deny that one or two people did pay some attention to my book. They had to. And they got it free in the course of their trade as book reviewers. One of these, who in his spare time is a professor at Yale, summed up the whole thing by saying that the trouble with me was my intense moral idealism. Such a quality would naturally distort anybody's view of education. A university president guilty of moral idealism? What is the world coming to? By some process of association of ideas I am reminded of the remarks of one of our alumni who in a recent discussion at the University of Chicago said that everything I had said about football was logical, perfectly logical, very logical indeed. "But," he said, "if the University abolishes football, my son, now fifteen years old, will not want to go there." In other words, "logical" is a term of reproach, and the University of Chicago should be illogical because one of its alumni has an illogical child. I have even heard the word "educational" in the same slurring connotation, as when a Princeton graduate wrote to Woodrow Wilson saying, "I will have

nothing more to do with Princeton. You are turning my dear old college into an educational institution., A university president who is suspected of an interest in morals, in intellect, or even in education deserves the severest condemnation from those who have the true interests of our country at heart.

But all these things are as nothing compared with the menace of metaphysics. I had mildly suggested that metaphysics might unify the modern university. I knew it was a long word, but I thought my audience of learned reviewers would know what it meant. I was somewhat surprised to find that to them metaphysics was a series of balloons, floating far above the surface of the earth, which could be pulled down by vicious or weak-minded people when they wanted to win an argument. The explosion of one of these balloons or the release of the gases it contained might silence, but never convince, a wise man. The wise man would go away muttering, "Words, words, words," or "Anti-scientific," "Reactionary," or even "Fascist." Knowing that there is nothing true unless experimental science makes it so, the wise man knows that metaphysics is simply a technical name for superstition.

Now I might as well make a clean breast of it all. I am interested in education, in morals, in intellect, and in metaphysics. I even go so far as to hold that there is a necessary relation among all these things. I am willing to assert that without one we cannot have the others and that without the others we cannot have the one with which I am primarily concerned, namely education.

I insist, moreover, that everything that is happening in the world today confirms the immediate and pressing necessity of pulling ourselves together and getting ourselves straight on these matters. The world is probably closer to disintegration now than at any time since the fall of the Roman Empire. If there are any forces of clarification and unification left, however slight and ineffectual they may appear, they had better be mobilized instantly, or all that we have known as Western Civilization may vanish.

Even if we assume that peace will soon be restored, we must grant that our country has long been afflicted with problems which, though apparently insoluble, must be solved if this nation is to be preserved or to be worth preserving. These problems are not material problems. We may have faith that the vast resources of our land and the technological genius of our people will produce a supply of material goods adequate for the maintenance of that interesting fiction, the American Standard of Living. No, our problems are moral, intellectual, and spiritual. The paradox of

starvation in the midst of plenty illustrates the nature of our difficulties. This paradox will not be resolved by technical skill or scientific data. It will be resolved, if it is resolved at all, by wisdom and goodness.

Now wisdom and goodness are the aim of higher education. How can it be otherwise? Wisdom and goodness are the end of human life. If you dispute this, you are at once entering upon a metaphysical controversy; for you are disputing about the nature of being and the nature of man. This is as it should be. How can we consider man's destiny unless we ask what he is? How can we talk about preparing men for life unless we ask what the end of life may be? At the base of education, as at the base of every human activity, lies metaphysics.

So it is with science. As Dr. H. S. Burr of the Yale Medical School has put it: "One of the primitive assumptions of science is that we live in a universe of order; order determined by, and controlled through, the operation of fundamental principles capable of elucidation and reasonably exact definition. This assumption states that there is a metaphysics, a body of universal laws which can be grasped by the human intellect and utilized effectively in the solution of human problems."

So it is with ethics and politics. We want to lead the good life. We want the good state as a means to that life. Once more, to find the good life and the good state, we must inquire into the nature of man and the ends of life. The minute we do that we are metaphysicians in spite of ourselves. Moreover, if ethics is the science of human freedom, we must know at the beginning whether and in what sense man is free. Here we are metaphysicians once again. And the soundness of our moral conclusions depends on whether we are good metaphysicians or bad ones. So the more preposterous positions of Mill's *Essay on Liberty* originate in his mistaken or inadequate analysis of the doctrine of free will; and Aristotle's defense of natural slavery results from his failure to remember that according to Aristotelian metaphysics there can be no such thing as a natural slave.

So it is with education. Here the great criminal was Mr. Eliot, who as President of Harvard applied his genius, skill, and longevity to the task of robbing American youth of their cultural heritage. Since he held that there were no such things as good or bad subjects of study, his laudable effort to open the curriculum to good ones naturally led him to open it to bad ones and finally to destroy it altogether. Today, though it is possible to get an education in an

American university, a man would have to be so bright and know so much to get it that he wouldn't really need it. Our institutions give full support to the proposition of Gibbon that "instruction is seldom of much efficacy except in those happy dispositions in which it is almost superfluous." Today the young American comprehends only by accident the intellectual tradition of which he is a part and in which he must live: for its scattered and disjointed fragments are strewn from one end of the campus to the other. Our university graduates have far more information and far less understanding than in the colonial period. And our universities present themselves to our people in this crisis either as rather ineffectual trade schools or as places where nice boys and girls have a nice time under the supervision of nice men and women in a nice environment.

The crucial error is that of holding that nothing is any more important than anything else, that there can be no order of goods and no order in the intellectual realm. There is nothing central and nothing peripheral, nothing primary and nothing secondary, nothing basic and nothing superficial. The course of study goes to pieces because there is nothing to hold it together. Triviality, mediocrity, and vocationalism take it over because we have no standard by which to judge them. We have little to offer as a substitute for a sound curriculum except talk of personality, "character," and great teachers, the slogans of educational utilitarianism.

We see, then, that metaphysics plays a double part in higher education. By way of their metaphysics educators determine what education they shall offer. By way of metaphysics their students must lay the foundations of their moral, intellectual, and spiritual life. By way of metaphysics I arrive at the conclusion that the aim of education is wisdom and goodness and that studies which do not bring us closer to this goal have no place in a university. If you have a different opinion, you must show that you have a better metaphysics. By way of metaphysics, students, on their part, may recover a rational view of the universe and of their role in it. If you deny this proposition you take the responsibility of asserting that a rational view of the universe and one's role in it is no better than an irrational one or none at all.

Let us, in the light of these principles, look at the relation of education to the improvement of society. We all want to improve society, and we want college graduates because of their education to want to improve society and to know how to do it. Differences appear when we come to the method by which these educational objects may be attained. Since the issue before us is education, I shall

not attempt to deal with the problem of how a university may through its scientific investigations best prevent or cure soil erosion, juvenile delinquency, or war. I shall discuss only the method by which an institution may develop in its students a social consciousness and a social conscience.

At first glance it would seem that we should all agree that in order to talk about society or its improvement we should have to inquire into the nature of society, into the common and abiding characteristics of society, and of those unusual animals who compose it, namely men. We should want to consider the history of societies, their rise, development, and decay. We should wish to examine their object, the various ways of achieving it, and the degree to which each succeeded or failed. In order to talk about success or failure we should have to have some notions about what a good society was. Without such notions we could not appraise the societies that came under our eye or the one in which we lived. We should need to have some conception of a good society in order to decide what improvement was; for we all know that we have welcomed many measures as beneficent which when adopted have seemed to leave us in as unsatisfactory condition as we were in before. In short, if we approached the great task of improving society without prejudice, we should think at once of trying to understand the nature, the purpose, and the history of the institutions which man has created. The quest for social improvement is a perpetual quest. Ever since societies existed men have been trying to make them better. The ideas and the experience of mankind should, one would think, be placed in the hands of the rising generation as it goes forward on the perpetual quest.

This would mean that if we wanted a student to have a sense of social responsibility and the desire to live up to his obligations we should have to give him, to achieve this aim, whatever we gave him for other purposes—an education in history and philosophy, together with the disciplines needed to understand those fields. For the purpose of making him an improver of society we should hope to make him, in a modest way, master of the political wisdom of the race. Without some inkling of it he could not understand a social problem. He could not criticize a social institution. He would be without the weapons needed to attack or to defend one. He could not tell a good one from a bad one. He could not think intelligently about one.

It is hardly necessary for me to add that nobody can think about a practical problem like the problem of improving society unless he knows the facts. He cannot comment usefully on the situation in

Germany unless he knows what the situation is. Neither can he do so unless he has some standard of criticism and of action. This standard cannot, of course, be a mathematical formula or some miraculous automatic intellectual gadget which when applied to the facts will immediately and infallibly produce the right answer. The practical world is a world of contingent singular things and not a mathematical system. No one has emphasized this point more forcefully than Aristotle. But this did not restrain him from attempting in the *Ethics* and *Politics* to work out the general principles of the good life and the good state, or from trying to show the utility of such principles in his society and, as I think, in any other.

If, then, we are to have standards of social criticism and social action, and if they are to be anything but emotional standards, they must result from philosophical and historical study and from the habit of straight thinking therein. It would be a wonderful thing if we were all so conditioned that our reflexes worked unanimously in the right direction when confronted by political and economic injustice, if we could be trained in infancy to recognize and fight it. But even if we could arrive at adolescence in this happy state I am afraid that our excellent habits might fall away under pressure. Something is needed to preserve them, and this is understanding. This is another way of saying that the intellect commands the will. Our parents should make every effort in our childhood to moderate our passions and to habituate us to justice and prudence. But the role of higher education in this connection must be to supply the firm and enduring groundwork to sustain these habits when the tumult of adult life beats upon them.

It seems obvious to me, therefore, that the kind of education I have been urging is the kind that helps to develop a social consciousness and a social conscience. Why isn't it obvious to everybody else? The first reason, I think, is the popularity of the cult of skepticism. I have been saying that I want to give the student knowledge about society. But we have got ourselves into such a state of mind that if anybody outside of natural science says he knows anything, he is a dogmatist and an authoritarian. Anybody who says, "I don't know because nobody can"; or, "Everything is a matter of opinion"; or, "I will take no position because I am tolerant and open-minded" is a liberal, progressive, democratic fellow to whom the fate of the world may safely be entrusted.

I regret that I am forced to remind you that the two most eminent skeptics of modern times were among its most stalwart reactionaries. Hume was a Tory of the deepest dye, and Montaigne was, too. This was a perfectly natural consequence of their philosophical

position. Montaigne held, in effect that “there was nothing more dangerous than to touch a political order once it had been established. For who knows whether the next will be better?” The world is living by custom and tradition; we should not disturb it on the strength of private opinions which express little more than our own moods and humors, or, at the utmost the local prejudices of our own country.” The decision to which the skepticism of Hume and Montaigne led them was the decision to let the world alone. There is another decision to which they could have come and at which others of their faith have actually arrived. If we can know nothing about society, if we can have only opinion about it, and if one man’s opinion is as good as another’s, then we may decide to get what we irrationally want by the use of irrational means, namely force. The appeal to reason is vain in a skeptical world. That appeal can only be successful if those appealed to have some rational views of the society of which they are a part.

A second reason why some people doubt the social utility of the education I favor is that they belong to the cult of immediacy, or of what may be called presentism. In this view the way to comprehend the world is to grapple with the reality you find about you. You tour the stockyards and the steel plants and understand the industrial system. There is no past. Any reference to antiquity or the Middle Ages shows that you are not interested in social progress. Philosophy is merely a function of its time and place. We live in a different time and usually a different place. Hence philosophers who lived yesterday have nothing to say to us today.

But we cannot understand the environment by looking at it. It presents itself to us as a mass of incomprehensible items. Simply collecting these items does not enlighten us. It may lead only to that worship of information which, according to John Dewey, still curses the social studies, and understanding escapes us still. We attack old problems not knowing they are old and make the same mistakes because we do not know they were made. So Stuart Chase and Thurman Arnold some years ago renewed the mediaeval controversy between the nominalists and the realists without showing that they realized that the subject had ever been discussed before or that they had the knowledge or training to conduct the discussion to any intelligible end.

The method of disposing of philosophy by placing it in a certain time and then saying that time is gone has been adequately dealt with by a contemporary historian. He says, “It ascribes the birth of Aristotelianism to the fact that Aristotle was a Greek and a pagan, living in a society based on slavery, four centuries before Christ; it

also explains the revival of Aristotelianism in the thirteenth century by the fact that St. Thomas Aquinas was an Italian, a Christian, and even a monk, living in a feudal society, whose political and economic structure was widely different from that of the fourth-century Greece; and it accounts equally well for the Aristotelianism of J. Maritain, who is French, a layman, and living in the 'bourgeois' society of a nineteenth-century republic. Conversely, since they were living in the same times and the same places, just as Aristotle should have held the same philosophy as Plato, so Abelard and St. Bernard, St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas Aquinas, Descartes and Gassendi, all these men, who flatly contradicted one another, should have said more or less the same things."

You will see at once that skepticism and presentism are related to a third ism that distorts our view of the method of education for social improvement. This is the cult of scientism, a cult to which, curiously enough, very few natural scientists belong. It is a cult composed of those who misconceive the nature or the role of science. They say that science is modern; science is tentative; science is progressive. Everything which is not science is antiquated, or at best irrelevant. A writer in so respectable and learned a publication as the *International Journal of Ethics* has called upon us to follow science in our quest for the good life, and the fact that he is a philosopher suggests that the cult of scientism has found members in the most unlikely places. For it must be clear that though we can and should use science to achieve social improvement, we cannot follow it to this destination. The reason is that science does not tell us where to go. Men may employ it for good or evil purposes; but it is the men that have the purposes, and they do not learn them from their scientific studies.

Scientism is a disservice to science. The rise of science is the most important fact of modern life. No student should be permitted to complete his education without understanding it. Universities should and must support and encourage scientific research. From a scientific education we may expect an understanding of science. From scientific investigation we may expect scientific knowledge. We are confusing the issue and demanding what we have no right to ask if we seek to learn from science the goals of human life and of organized society.

Finally, we have the cult of anti-intellectualism, which has some oddly assorted members. They range from Hitler, who thinks with his red corpuscles, through the members of the three other cults, to men of good will, who, since they are men of good will, are at the opposite pole to Hitler, but can give no rational justification for


being there. They hold that philosophy of the heart which Auguste Comte first celebrated. Comte belonged to the cult of scientism. Therefore he could know nothing but what science told him. But he wanted social improvement. Hence he tried to make a philosophy and finally a religion out of science, and succeeded only in producing something which was no one of the three and which was, in fact, little more than sentimentalism.

Sentimentalism is an irrational desire to be helpful to one's fellowmen. It sometimes appears as an ingratiating and even a redeeming quality in those who cannot or will not think. But the sentimentalist is really a dangerous character. He distrusts the intellect, because it might show him he is wrong. He believes in the primacy of the will, and this is what makes him dangerous. You don't know what you ought to want; you don't know why you want what you want. But you do know that you want it. This easily develops into the notion that since you want it, you ought to have it. You are a man of good will, and your opponents by definition are not. Since you ought to have what you want, you should get it if you have the power; and here the journey from the man of good will to Hitler is complete.

This is indeed the position in which the members of all four cults—skepticism, presentism, scientism, and anti-intellectualism—find themselves on questions of social improvement. Since they cannot know, they must feel. We can only hope that they will feel good. But we cannot be very hopeful. Where does the good will come from? Long ago the campaign before the Austrian plebiscite gave us the news for the first time that Hitler was guided by a special revelation. Most other men of good will do not claim such intimate contact with the Deity. But they are uniformly mysterious about the source of their inspiration. If it is not knowledge, and hence in this case philosophy, it must be habit—habit of the most irrational kind. A university can have nothing to do with irrational habits, except to try to moderate the bad ones and support the good ones. But if by hypothesis we cannot do this by rational means, we are forced to the conclusion that a university must be a large nursery school tenderly preserving good habits from shock, in the hope that if they can be nursed long enough they will last through life, though without any rational foundation. In this view the boarding-school in the country would be the only proper training ground for American youth, and the University of Chicago could take no part in social improvement. In fact, it would be a subversive institution.

It hardly helps us here to say, as many anti-intellectuals do, that education must educate "the whole man." Of all the meaningless

phrases in educational discussion this is the prize. Does it mean that education must do the whole job of translating the whole infant into a whole adult? Must it do what the church, the family, the state, the YMCA, and the Boy Scouts allege they are trying to do? If so, what is the place of these important or interesting organizations, and what becomes of that intellectual training which educational institutions might be able to give if they could get around to it? Are we compelled to assume that our students can learn nothing from life or that they have led no life before coming to us and lead none after they come? Moreover, what we are seeking is a guide to the emphasis that higher education must receive. Talk of the whole man seems to imply that there should be no emphasis at all. All “parts” of the man are of equal importance: his dress, his food, his health, his family, his business. Is education to emphasize them all? That would be like saying, if we were going to study the war, that in studying it we should emphasize the war. A flat equality among subjects, interests, and powers will hardly lead to the satisfactory development of any. Is it too much to say that if we can teach our students to lead the life of reason we shall do all that can be expected of us and do at the same time the best thing that can be done for the whole man? The task of education is to make rational animals more perfectly rational.

We see, then, that the quest for social improvement is a perpetual one. Men have always wanted not a different society, but a better one. What a better society is and how to get it has been one of the persistent problems of philosophy and one of the fundamental issues in the tradition of the Western World. Only those who recognize the important place that philosophy and the wisdom of the race must hold in education for citizenship can hope to educate men and women who can contribute to the improvement of society and who will want to do so. The cults of skepticism, presentism, scientism, and anti-intellectualism will lead us to despair, not merely of education, but also of society. 

Chapter 2 from his book, *Education For Freedom* - Louisiana State University Press (1943)

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