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Wisdom and goodness are the aim of higher education. How can it be otherwise? Wisdom and goodness are the end of human life.

—Robert Maynard Hutchins



A MORAL AND AN EDUCATIONAL REVOLUTION

Mortimer J. Adler

It is particularly in the classrooms of our colleges that the young are suffering the worst abuses. To correct these abuses, not only must curriculums be revised, but faculties must once again consist of teachers rather than professors, of men interested in liberal and humanistic learning, for themselves as well as for others, more than in research or in the advancement of knowledge in some specialized or technical field. Unfortunately, most of the young, precisely because they are so poorly educated, do not and cannot know the kind of education they so sorely need—the kind that would have maximum relevance not to business or worldly success, but to the business of making good lives for themselves and to success in that effort.

Applying here the critical distinction between natural needs and conscious wants, what must be said is that all our young need

genuinely liberal and humanistic learning as a means to the good life, the dullest among them as well as the brightest. But the brightest among them do not now want the kind of education they most need, as indicated by the types of courses they themselves arrange for when they set up their own Free Universities. They do not want the kind of education that they need because they have not been taught the basic moral lessons about the shape of a good human life, about its constituent parts and the means they must employ to achieve it. Miseducated and, therefore, misguided, they thrash about in a variety of wrong directions, hitting out against political, economic, and social conditions that have favored them, instead of against the deficiencies and deformities of an educational system that has mistreated them so badly.

We know that the time of our lives—our new century—is better than any earlier period of human life. That judgment must now be qualified in one significant respect. The statement is true for all the external conditions of a human life on earth, conditions provided by technological advances and by a greater approximation to the ideals of democracy—brought about by the beginning of the twentieth century revolution. Included among these external conditions is, of course, equality of educational opportunity in all its external aspects. But it is precisely in the sphere of education that the twenty-first century is inferior to the oligarchical, class-divided, slave-holding, poverty ridden societies of the past, in which the possibility of making a good life was open only to the very few.

When schooling was given only to the privileged few, it was directed to the right ends. It was essentially liberal and humanistic and, therefore, prepared the few whose time was free from toil to use that free time in all the forms of learning and creative work that constitute the activities of leisure. In this way it helped them to make good lives for themselves. The irony of our present situation is that now, when a large proportion of our population is provided with external conditions that help them to make good lives for themselves, the educational facilities do not fulfill that promise by affording them the kind of education they need. Instead of being the kind of education appropriate to free men, and men with ample free time for the pursuits of leisure, it is the kind of education appropriate to slaves or workers, men whose time will be mainly consumed by economic activities rather than devoted to the activities of leisure.

Many of the critics, old as well as young, direct their complaints at the wrong objects. One of the most regrettable features of our times and our society is not that it has a large number of highly vocal critics who complain about it, but rather that the complaints are voiced in ways that are so often mistaken, unreasonable, and off-

the-target.

On the one hand, the dissident young, frequently under the influence of their teachers and professors, together with others full of complaints about our society, do not hesitate to make moral pronouncements about social evils they think must be immediately eliminated. It is perfectly clear that they do not know or understand the moral principles that would give support to their charges, and that they have not engaged in the moral reasoning that could make their criticisms tenable. Exactly the same principles that might support criticism of racism, crime, and poverty should lead them to criticize a society that exaggerates the importance of sensual pleasures, that engages in the over-production of superfluous commodities, and that does not draw a line between the frivolous and the serious use of free time. Exactly the same principles and reasoning would also help them to understand what is wrong with being a drop out, a junkie, a self-alienated refugee from reason, or an existentialist cop-out—wrong in a way that can ruin a human life—or what is wrong with over-indulgence in sex, what is wrong with psychedelic escapism, with attempts to expand the sensate life but not the life of the mind, or what is wrong with pure emotionalism and the rejection of reason, etc.

Whether it results from alcohol, pot, or stronger narcotics, drunkenness is drunkenness—a state of aggravated passions, disordered imagination, and uncontrolled impulses, ending in torpor, all of which is incompatible with the exercise of prudence and moral virtue in the choice of goods. Show me a person who condones drunkenness by any means, and I will show you one who does not understand what a good life is or how to achieve it. That same person will be one who, when he speaks out against this or that social injustice, will not be doing so with a commitment to the good life, correctly conceived, and so will be lacking a rational basis for his social complaints.

If this estimate of the character of the most vocal and emotional critics of our society, both old and young, appears to be harsh, I can mitigate its severity only by saying that the fault is not theirs. It lies in the dismal failure of our educational system, under which most of them have been defrauded of a schooling they had a right to expect. Their minds have not been opened to any wisdom or trained to seek it; their minds have not been disciplined in the ways of reason, and so they have not learned to respect it.

On the other hand, the self-appointed guardians of the morals and patriotism of our society are no less dogmatic in their pronouncements, or in their suggested cures for the evils they profess to see. They propose, for example, the re-injection of morality into the

schools in the form of simple homilies that are as irrelevant today as they were in the past, when they abounded. But morality cannot be taught by homilies.

It is true of these critics, too, that they do not know or understand the principles that would give moral support to their charges. Exactly the same principles that might support their criticisms of the educational system, or of the young, or of corruptions in government, should also lead them to criticize a society that exaggerates the importance of wealth and wealth getting, and an economy that depends too much on defense contracts. Exactly the same principles would help them to understand what is wrong with being a businessman (when business is considered an end in itself)—wrong in a way that can ruin a human life—what is wrong with over-indulgence in alcohol or sports or television, what is wrong with intellectual escapism, combined with ignorance of and contempt for the life of the mind, what is wrong with cruelty and the excessive use of force, with the rejection of compromise, and so forth.

In the course of the centuries, human institutions have been greatly improved, and they might be further improved without limit, as William Graham Sumner once remarked, were it not for folly and vice. Folly and vice are human defects, not American defects. Twenty-first century America has no monopoly on folly and vice, nor do the critics of the twentieth century have a monopoly on conscience-stricken reactions to human folly and vice. Plato charged the Athenians who condemned Socrates with folly and vice. The dialogues of Plato are a more penetrating critique of the false values of Athens, at the time when it was the glory of antiquity, than anything said about America now, because Plato had a true scale of values on which to base his criticisms. That is clearly not the case with the most vociferous and emotional critics of American society today.

The evidence—too often, I regret to say—suggests that they do not. They are as much subject to folly and vice as are the objects of their criticism. And the only salvation for them, as for all the rest of us, is the moral wisdom that must be learned to correct the folly, and the moral discipline that must be cultivated to correct the vice.

To this end we need a moral revolution and an educational revolution together, for each would appear to be impossible without the other.

Although it is reasonable in other areas of human life to expect revolutionary changes to be called for and engineered by the oppressed we cannot expect a moral and educational revolution to


come from those who are deeply dissatisfied with the moral climate in which they live, but who also lack the moral training and the liberal education needed to reform the mores of our society and its educational system. We appear to be in a cul-de-sac. It may be too much to expect the moral and educational revolution we need to come from anyone now alive. The discontented have not learned enough and are not likely to, because most of them do not trust reason as a way of learning what must be learned. Perhaps if, in some way, the generations to come could learn what a good life is and how to achieve it, and could be given the discipline, not only of mind but of character, that would make them willingly responsive to the categorical oughts of a teleological ethics, perhaps, then, the moral and educational revolution might begin and take hold.

To hope for this is to hope for no more than that the restoration of a sound and practical moral philosophy will enable enlightened common sense to prevail in human affairs. This is not only a practicable ideal, it is a practical necessity. In the middle of the nineteenth century, when a constitutional democracy in this country was still more than a hundred years away, Horace Mann wrote:

“The establishment of a republican government without well-appointed and efficient means for the universal education of the people is the most rash and foolhardy experiment ever tried by man.”

How much truer that statement is today when we now have universal suffrage! Not only the prosperity of our high-tech economy but, even more so, the well-being of our political democracy depends upon the reconstitution of our schools.

Our schools are not turning out young people prepared for the high office and the duties of citizenship in a democratic republic. Our political institutions cannot thrive, they may not even survive, if we do not produce a greater number of thinking citizens, from whom some statesmen of the type we had in the eighteenth century might eventually emerge. We are, indeed, a nation at risk, and nothing but radical reform of our schools can save us from impending disaster.

Whatever the price we must pay in money and effort to do this, the price we will pay for not doing it will be much greater. 

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