



**The aim of education is to cultivate the individual's capacities for mental growth and moral development; to help him acquire the intellectual and moral virtues requisite for a good human life, spent publicly in political action or service and privately in a noble or honorable use of free time for the creative pursuits of leisure among which continued learning throughout life is preeminent.**

**—Mortimer Adler**

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## THE CRISIS IN CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION

Mortimer J. Adler

- Part II -

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2. I turn now to the psychological error concerning man's nature. So-called "scientific psychology," which has its roots in the physiological laboratory and its ideology from the evolutionary speculations of nineteenth-century materialism, regards man as an animal different from others only in degree of intelligence or in such accidental matters as erect posture. Man is a bundle of reflexes which can be conditioned, as in other animals, by the positive and negative stimuli of pleasure and pain; he learns as other animals do, by trial and error—or if he has insight, as the *gestaltists* claim, so do all other animals; his habits are all sensori-motor co-ordinations, the archetype of which is the reflex arc. When to the experimental literature are added views which have their origin in the clinic or on the psychoanalytical couch, man's rationality, if admitted at all, is reduced to the craft whereby his ego is forced by his id to rationalize the basic instinctive drives which get him into social conflicts. His behavior originates with and is controlled by his visceral urges, and intelligence is their servant, reason their cunning.

It should be apparent, though it is seldom seen, that such a conception of human nature makes it impossible to explain how man can be a scientist, not to mention a philosopher. Scientific truth, which man possesses, and the scientific method which he employs, cannot be accounted for in terms of conditioned reflexes or sensori-motor co-ordinations, except by the most obvious verbal legerdemain. The very ideal of science—that the truth, to whatever extent it is achieved, is objective and independent of our passions and urges—must be an illusion, if reason operates only in the service of the gut and under its dictation. With the scientific ideal goes all the rest of morality, for all ideals become illusions which thinly conceal man's brutishness. The paradox still remains, however, that man is the only animal which finds it necessary to fool himself with ideals.

The opposite view, which makes the issue, can be simply stated, though not here argued. Man is a rational animal, and in possessing rationality, which is not just animal intelligence to a higher degree, he is essentially, that is, specifically, different from

brutes. Man has all the powers possessed by brute animals: he has vegetative powers; he has sensitive, appetitive, and locomotive powers. But in addition he has an intellect, and this power, the power of understanding, of abstracting, judging, reasoning, no other animal has. It is by the exercise of this power that man is an artist, a scientist, a philosopher; that he lives socially by conventions determined by himself rather than instinctively as other social animals do; that he has a syntactical language for the communication of knowledge and commands; that he is able freely to choose the means by which he attains the end he desires because he understands it to be good.

Opposite educational consequences follow from choosing opposite sides in these two issues.

*If man is a rational animal, constant in nature throughout history, then there must be certain constant features in every sound educational program, regardless of culture or epoch.* The basic education of a rational animal is the discipline of his rational powers and the cultivation of his intellect. This discipline is achieved by the liberal arts, the arts of reading and listening, of writing and speaking, and, perforce, of thinking, since man is a social animal as well as a rational one and his intellectual life is lived in a community which can exist only through the communication of men. The three R's, which always signified the formal disciplines, are the essence of liberal or general education. They cannot be inculcated by college courses in logic or mathematics or classical languages. That was the error of classical education, which the progressivist rightly condemned. One learns to write and read only by performing these acts, but since reading and writing are intellectual arts, the habits must be formed under the discipline of rules of art; moreover, intellectual habits cannot be formed intelligently unless the rules themselves are understood. The program of liberal education consists of the liberal arts, acquired as habits through performance under intelligible disciplines. In short, the A.B. degree should be awarded for competence in reading, writing, and reckoning.

But one cannot learn to read and write without subject matter. The reason is trained in its proper operations by these arts, but the intellect is not cultivated by them. That can be accomplished only through furnishing it with knowledge and wisdom, by acquainting it with truth, by giving it a mastery of ideas. At this point, the other basic feature of liberal education appears, namely, the great books, the master productions in all fields, philosophy, science, history, and belles-lettres. They are not only the material which must be used to teach students how to read and write, but they constitute

the cultural tradition by which the intellects of each generation must first be cultivated.

Note, here, how the myth of progress is denied. If there is philosophical wisdom as well as scientific knowledge, if the former consists of insights and ideas that change little from time to time, and if even the latter has many abiding concepts and a relatively constant method, if the great works of literature as well as of philosophy touch upon the permanent moral problems of mankind and express the universal convictions of men involved in moral conflict—if these things are so, then the great books of ancient and medieval, as well as modern, times are a repository of knowledge and wisdom, a tradition of culture which must initiate each new generation. The reading of these books is not for antiquarian purposes; the interest is not archaeological or philological. That was the type of interest which dominated the humanistic course in the German gymnasium, and was “classical education” at its worst. Rather the books are to be read because they are as contemporary today as when they were written, and that because the problems they deal with and the ideas they present are not subject to the law of perpetual and interminable progress. The fact that the ancients and medievals were wrong in many matters of scientific knowledge, the fact that even Newton and Galileo were wrong in their turn, makes no difference to the philosophical accomplishments of these periods, nor even to the insights and procedures of the great masters of science.

There is not space here to expound fully the curriculum for liberal education which President Hutchins has proposed and which is in operation at St. John’s College in Annapolis. I am merely indicating how the emphasis upon the liberal arts and the great books follows from and is justified by the fundamental theses which distinguish his educational philosophy. If the educational system were properly divided into three parts—elementary, secondary or collegiate, and university—what I have here called liberal or general education would occur at the second level. At the lowest level, elementary education would inculcate the fundamental routines of language and mathematics and stimulate the imagination and the talents for fine arts, thus preparing for college in a manner quite unlike that determined by college board examinations. At the university level, which might begin at what is now the junior year of college, if the A.B. were advanced as the degree for secondary education, would come all the specialized and professional studies. A man can be well trained as a chemist or a historian, a lawyer or a physician, only after he has been fundamentally educated, after he has learned to read and write and has some ideas. If general education empha-

sizes the permanent studies—the liberal arts and the cultural tradition—specialized education, at the university level, is the place for the progressive studies, the studies in which novelty and invention predominate.

If one examines the education which now prevails from the elementary school through to the university, one discovers that the opposite theses are at work. Influenced by the myths of progress and utility, failing to recognize the constancy of human nature, and denying, implicitly or explicitly, man's distinctive rationality, the existing system has completely discarded the permanent studies or, what is almost as bad, put them in the university where they are out of place. In terms of a false educational psychology which misinterpreted experiments on the transfer of trainings as showing there is no point to formal discipline, not enough effort is made to teach students how to read and write. If man has an intellect it can be disciplined despite all the findings on the limited transferability of training from one set of sensori-motor co-ordinations to another. In terms of pragmatic positivism, the cultural tradition is ignored because there is nothing worth knowing except the most recent results of scientific research. Any book older than yesterday is hardly worth reading, for by the law of progress we must have advanced to a new and better stage of knowledge. We must teach students how to face contemporary problems, and each generation must pull itself up by its own bootstraps, for the problems are ever changing and the past can afford no help at all.

Because man is viewed as having only an animal career and not a human destiny, interest and adjustment have taken the place of discipline and cultivation as the watchwords of educational policy. The whole aim of education changes, for adjustment leads to the cult of success, the "ideal" of getting ahead by beating your neighbor. The emphasis on the interests of the student makes him a buyer instead of as patient, and the teacher becomes a salesman rather than a doctor prescribing the cure for ignorance and incompetence. It is the student who is the master under the elective system, which was invented because of the excessive proliferation of scientific courses in the curriculum, and has been perpetuated by that perversion of educational policy which makes the young, i.e., the relatively ignorant and incompetent, choose their own road to learning, according to the fickle interests of their immaturity. Extracurricular activities originated in response to interests that were tangential to the main business of education, but in many schools they have become the curriculum, and the substantial studies have been thrown out. They are not even extracurricular. Many college curriculums offer courses from A to Z without discrimination; and

the university, instead of being a hierarchy of studies and a community of scholars, is a collection of specialties, together only in geographical proximity.

Elementary education is devoid of discipline. The basic routines in language and mathematics have been dropped or corrupted. Memory is not cultivated. Social studies, current events, manual arts and games occupy the major time. Secondary or collegiate education fails even more, though in part the failure is due to the inadequate preparation given in the elementary schools. Our Bachelors of Arts cannot read, write, or speak their own language well; neither they nor, for that matter, our Masters of Arts, are acquainted with the liberal arts. They cannot read and they have not read the great books in all fields. They do not possess the leading ideas or understand the basic problems which are permanently human. They have been fed for years on textbooks and lecture courses which hand out predigested materials; and, as a result, they are chaotically informed and viciously indoctrinated with the local prejudices of professors and their textbooks. As a final consequence, education at the graduate and professional level has been necessarily debased. Law schools must teach reading; graduate schools struggle to get Ph.D. candidates to write simple, clear English.

I conclude with the question: What are the chances of this deplorable situation being remedied? What chance is there of the Hutchins reform being effected? I ask this question, of course, on the assumption that the truth lies on his side of the basic issues, and with the insight that his program is the moderate one between the extremes of a dead classicism and a progressivism run amuck. Even granted this, I must confess that I am pessimistic, for a number of reasons.


First and foremost, there is the inertia of vested interests, which perpetuate existing human institutions. Organized education is one of the largest rackets in this country, and the teachers' colleges, especially such influential ones as those at Columbia, Chicago, and California, are the gangs which control what goes on, in ways that do not always meet the eye and would not stand inspection. To call education a racket is, of course, to speak metaphorically, but the comparison has point. Reforming education will have to use racket-busting techniques or it will not succeed.

In the second place, there is the vicious circle in the teaching profession itself. The teachers of today were taught by the teachers of yesterday and teach the teachers of tomorrow. When this vi-

cious circle, which has always existed, gets standardized by schools of education, in which a philosophy of education becomes an official program imposed upon the profession and the system by various accrediting agencies, degrees, requirements for promotion, and so forth, the circle becomes almost impregnable. Even if the great mass of teachers were to feel that there is something wrong with education, they could do nothing about it. They have been subjugated; worse than that, they have been indoctrinated by the reigning philosophy so that they no longer have enough free judgment to be critical; but worst of all, they themselves have been so inadequately educated that they would be hindered from understanding the principles or taking part in the execution of the reform being proposed. For the most part, the members of the teaching profession are over trained and undereducated. Teaching is an art and a teacher must be trained, but since the technique is one of communicating knowledge and inculcating discipline, it is not educational psychology and courses in method and pedagogy which train a teacher, but the liberal arts. Further, a teacher should have a cultivated mind, generally cultivated regardless of his field of special interest, for he must be the visible and moving representative of the cultural tradition to his students. But how can he be this if he has no acquaintance with the cultural heritage, if he cannot read well, and if he is not well read?

Finally, there is the even deeper vicious circle in which *an educational system and the society in which it flourishes are reciprocal. You cannot improve a society without changing its education; but you cannot lift the educational system above the level of the society in which it exists.* We probably have as good an educational program today in this country as we deserve, according to our cultural attainments and aspirations. If my pessimism encounters objection on the grounds that the movement which John Dewey led succeeded in changing American education, I must answer that that change moved with the tide of American life and expressed its own dominant values and interests. The reform in which I am interested must work against the tide, challenging the worst, and also the most obdurate, features of our national *ethos*—our materialism, our pragmatism, our modernism.

But pessimism must not lead to despair, for much is at stake that makes it imperative to keep working for reform so long as a chance remains. There are many signs and portents that the modern world is headed for a great social upheaval and a drastic cultural eclipse. *We are viewing a race between two revolutions—a violent one by fire and sword and a peaceful one by education and reason—to end the iniquitous capitalistic system and the rotten bourgeois culture of our times.* Even if, in the world at large, violence is

needed to win the day, the educational revolution must follow to preserve and nourish the fruits of victory. In this country, democracy and liberal institutions are at stake, for these can be sustained and developed only by a truly liberal education. Failing to develop critical minds, failing to liberate the mind by discipline, contemporary education makes the way easy for demagogues of all sorts. Education which does not build on wisdom or respect reason above all else, leads to the frustration of the individual and the brutal conflict of social forces. For whenever reason does not rule, the mind must yield to the sheer weight of opinion propagated by pressure; only might remains and none dares say it is not right. 

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