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Relativism In The Higher Learning

The Higher Learning in America: A Reassessment. By Paul Woodring. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968. 236 + xv pp. \$6.95

IN his attempt to reassess the work of Veblen and Hutchins, Professor Woodring notes many contemporary defects in American higher learning. He also warns against remedies worse than the diseases to be cured. He is particularly concerned with the encroachments of the graduate schools on undergraduate, liberal education which then tends to become illiberal preparation for graduate specialization. However, he accepts graduate specialization as legitimate within its own domain, since its goals are clearly defined by experts in the various fields (pp. 50-51). To a layman, the authority of such experts seems absolute—especially when they speak *ex cathedra* regarding their disciplines. Since only fellow experts can question them on such matters, we have the learned journals in which such questioning occurs. Woodring rightly notes that the so-called “explosion of knowledge” could be described as a sharp increase in scholarly journals and scientific-technical data (p. 180).

Contemplating this state of affairs, it occurred to me that a modern Socrates would not respect contemporary academic specialists more than the non-academic specialists in his Athens. Their undoubted mastery of a limited field tended to make

them unaware of their ignorance in regard to ultimate life and death questions (*Apology*, 22C9-E5). A similar, but by no means identical, blindness informs the two chief dogmas of the academic life reported by Woodring. The first is that both “humanists” and “scientists” are expected to avoid “value-judgements” in drawing conclusions from the facts ascertained by their research (pp. 188-189). Also shared by the “humanities” and “sciences,” the second dogma asserts that everything human, including reason, is the product of one’s time or history.¹ Woodring insists that knowledge in the sciences is subject to much swifter historical change than humanistic knowledge (pp. 69, 72, 81, 181-182). Thus he still regards Lucretius as a great poet, although he would not dream of similarly honoring Lucretius’ physics and psychology. Woodring realizes that Lucretius viewed himself as a genuine philosopher or scientist, and that he did not distinguish between science and philosophy as Woodring does. Thus Woodring is convinced that modern science constitutes a decisive progress over Lucretian or Aristotelian science.²

The assumption of progress promulgated by Woodring and most contemporary educators was challenged by Rousseau and, especially, by Nietzsche. Nietzsche noted that progress implies goals or values by which progress or regress may be measured. To be sure, believers in progress subscribing to Dogma I¹ would use “reactionary” or “medieval” as substitutes for value-terms

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1. In this article, I refer to them as Dogma I and Dogma II. On their relationship, see L. Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, 1953), pp. 1-80.

2. Cf. my articles “The Unpopularity of Epicurean Materialism,” *The Modern Schoolman*, 45 (1968), pp. 299-311; “Law and the Human Condition,” *The Philosophy Forum*, 8 (1970), number 3.

such as "evil" and, similarly, "progressive," "modern," or "up-to-date" for "good." Noting that the substitutes were "values" too, Nietzsche questioned the intrinsic reality of all values or goals and, therefore, of all concepts of progress. His conclusion was that all aspects of human life were radically historical. No scientific "facts" exist apart from the "values" or interpretations organizing them and making them intelligible to men. Even sense perception organizes the chaos existing by nature, imposing human values on it. The way men organize their experience or conquer nature varies with their historical conditions. Thus neither Lucretian nor modern science can be regarded as superior; both are sublimations of the ultimately irrational power-drives (quanta of power) responsible for historical-evolutionary change. Reducing Dogma I to Dogma II, the human to the sub-human, Nietzsche is more consistent than Woodring and far less prone to regard Spenglerian pessimism about Western Civilization as premature (p. 68).

Too philosophic for an unquestioning acceptance of Dogma II, Nietzsche was compelled to ask whether it applies to itself. Does it not imply that in all eternity, no man will ever be able to transcend his historical situation, since all are products of their time? Lacking a point of view outside of time and in eternity, is it not impossible to ascertain the truth of any statement about all past, present, and future men? Thus, for Nietzsche, history and therefore all human life became questionable. Dogma II was not taken for granted. In this way, Nietzsche returned to the original meaning of history (*historia*) as a rational inquiry into the eternal origins (Plato, *Phaedo*, 96A8). The self-styled enemy of Socrates was, in this sense, a Socratic gadfly for those modern educators unaware of their ignorance of Dogma II.

FOR Socrates, philosophic or scientific questions were those stirred up by knowledge of one's ignorance. According to Socrates, subjective knowledge of one's ignorance is the only objective knowledge available to men. Thus Socrates would second Pascal's observation that men know too little to be dogmatic, but too much to be skeptics. Knowledge is bounded by ignorance, ignorance by knowledge. No ignorance is total; no knowledge complete. Of course, dogmatists or skeptics may doubt, deny, or attempt to set final limits to man's capacity to know. Thus, although unquestioning partisans of Dogma II insist on the dependence of all knowledge on

historical circumstances, genuine philosophers or scientists like Nietzsche will be aware of the problematical character of such universal statements about the boundaries of knowledge and ignorance.

Socrates contended that the only eternal knowledge available to men was not final, but ironic or questionable: an awareness of ignorance. The eternal objects of knowledge present themselves on man's horizon not as fixed, immutable entities but as eternal questions or objects of an eternal, dialectical quest.³ Unlike Marxist dialectic, Socratic dialectic is, in principle, endless; there is always more to be known about the most important questions. The answers are never so evident as the questions. Socrates realized that the vast majority can not reconcile themselves to an awareness of ignorance as the highest form of human knowledge. At some point, their most cherished answers present themselves as truer than the eternal questions. Indeed those answers might deny the eternal character of the questions as do Dogma II, and therefore, Dogma I, reducing all reasoning or questioning to ultimately irrational historical-evolutionary processes.

From Socrates' point of view, unquestioning adherents of Dogma II are less philosophic or scientific than the Athenian dogmatists who condemned him. For Socrates' accusers were convinced that they knew the truth about the most important matters. They were older citizens in whose eyes Socrates was an eccentric fool whose uncanny capacity to delude gifted youth made him dangerous. Socrates was condemned for corrupting the youth, not for being or claiming to be wise. He was unable to convince the Athenians that they did not know what they believed they knew. However, there was no need to convince them that knowledge of eternal things was available to men. Precisely such a need exists among men convinced of the ultimate truth of Dogma II which denies knowledge of eternity by reducing reason to history, being to time. The worst academic evils discerned by Woodring arise from the inability of modern educators, committed to Dogma II, to satisfy that need.

NIETZSCHE noted the questionableness of demanding total commitment, if one

3. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 1, 296; J. Klein, *A Commentary on Plato's Meno* (Chapel Hill, 1965) pp. 22-27, 86-87, 91-107, 121-256.

assumes that all man's values or goals are historically relative (i.e., reduction of Dogma I to Dogma II). It is one thing to demand total commitment if one knows one is right; it is entirely different to make the same demand if one denies the possibility of knowledge as distinct from faith or opinion. Or, as Nietzsche put it, relativists may be either honest or totally committed; they cannot be both.⁴ In this context total commitment engenders fanaticism whether by intolerant student militants or by professors arbitrarily committed to some specialized discipline. Nietzsche immortalized the virtues and failings of the latter fanaticism in his description of the expert on the brain of the leech.⁵ Not the whole leech, for that would already be too general and, consequently, "unscientific" or unscholarly. The specialist has no wish to lose himself in the vague, merely verbal generalities of religion and metaphysics. Contemptuous of "reactionary," "out-of-date" claims of the superiority of Socratic questioning to scientific specialization, he proudly announces that for genuine science, there is no distinction between high and low, swamp or sky; the proud, if somewhat humble claims of a Socrates spring from unscientific delusion.⁶

The relativist *ethos* informing the specialist's pride in his expertise precludes ranking the various disciplines in a modern university. From a modern scientific point of view, specializing in the leech's brain is not inferior to specializing in the nature of God. For the scientist who abstains from deriving values from his facts, there is no way of scientifically demonstrating the superiority of God to the leech. Indeed academic specialists tend to regard such theological-metaphysical questions of "values" or preferences as unscholarly and unscientific. Thus Woodring demands that students be made aware "that Western cul-

ture is only one of many" (p. 234). However, his two dogmas preclude becoming aware of the really important question: Is Western culture better than other cultures and, if so, why? Similarly, Nietzsche's reduction of Dogma I to Dogma II is reflected in Woodring's sympathy for students demanding the reduction of values or standards of behavior to the level of actual practice (pp. 77, 109-111). In addition to praising their lack of hypocrisy, Woodring might have cited La Rochefoucauld (No. 218): "Hypocrisy is the homage that vice offers to virtue." However deplorable hypocrisy may be, it does not demand a reduction of virtue to vice.

In terms of the relativism shared by both, the alienated student's frantic search for commitment is not so different from his professor's passionate commitment to some arbitrarily chosen scholarly-scientific specialization. Convinced of the ultimately irrational nature of all choice, radical Hippies and Yuppies refuse to make choices or to discriminate at all. Like Nietzsche's expert on the leech's brain, they refuse to distinguish high from low, swamp from sky. Yet, Woodring rightly notes that the same Hippies professing uncritical love for mankind will often hate their parents and other members of the "straight" world. Ironically, the parents exempted from this indiscriminate altruism are generally those whose "relativistic philosophies and permissive views of child rearing" encouraged their children to reject all hierarchies, including that of parents and children.⁷

The contradiction between the Hippie's protestations of universal love and his aversion for the "straight" world points to the eternal, Socratic question of the good life. The choice of one way of life necessarily involves rejection of alternative ways. Is the way chosen better than those rejected? Thus the question of the good life inevitably arises for those passionately

4. Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom*, 159; *Beyond Good and Evil*, 25.

5. Nietzsche, "The Leech," *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, IV; cf. *The Joyful Wisdom*, 54, 57, 112, 114, 242, 246, 300-301, 335, 373; *The Will to Power*, 272, 481, 556; K. Jaspers, *Nietzsche and Christianity* (Regnery-Gateway Paperback, 1963), pp. 70-72; Plato, *Theaetetus*, 165A1-2; Klein, pp. 66, 121-125, 226-256.

6. H. V. Jaffa, "The Case Against Political Theory," *Equality and Liberty* (New York, 1965), pp. 220-229.

7. Woodring, pp. 74-75, 92-93; Plato, *Republic*, VIII-IX; L. Strauss, "Liberal Education and Mass Democracy" and A. Bloom, "The Crisis of Liberal Education" in *Higher Education and Modern Democracy*, ed. R. Goldwin (Rand McNally Paperback, 1967), pp. 73-96, 121-139; R. McArthur, "The Roots of Modern Education," *Phalanx*, 1 (1967), pp. 74-80; J. Klein, "On Liberal Education," *Liberal Education*, 62 (1966), pp. 133-143; my article, "The Permanent Crisis of Liberal Education," *The Journal of Higher Education*, 39 (1968), pp. 104-107.

concerned with being happy or with obtaining what is genuinely good for themselves. That passionate concern or *eros* is the necessary condition for Socratic questioning (Plato, *Symposium*, 204D2-206B13).

ACCORDING to Socrates, men may want what is apparently noble, just, pious, or true, but no one in his right mind desires what is only apparently good for himself. In this crucial area, all desire the reality, not the appearance.⁸ Even Socrates' accusers agreed that all knowledge and possessions are worthless to the one lacking knowledge of what is truly good for him. Since the question of the good life is the highest object of knowledge, the life devoted to the rational quest for it is the only life worthy of a human being (*Apology*, 38A5-6). But one must know that one does not know the good before the eternal question of the good life can manifest itself on one's horizon. Thus one cannot share the conviction of Socrates' accusers that ancestral tradition had supplied them with adequate knowledge of the good life. When Socrates succeeded in convincing the most gifted youth that their parents were not really knowledgeable about the good, he was executed for corrupting the youth.

We have already observed that modern educators, convinced of their two dogmas, are less Socratic than Socrates' Athenian accusers who, at least, did not deny the possibility and necessity for objective knowledge of the good life. To be sure, such modern educators would not need to be convinced of their ignorance of the good, since they deny the possibility of scientific knowledge of "values." Either they capriciously commit themselves as does Nietzsche's specialist on the leech's brain, or their honest doubts are stifled in a noisy, tearful sea of assent or dissent. Still others have recourse to opiates such as Eastern mysticism or LSD (pp. 100-101).

CHAMPIONING his Athenian accusers over modern relativists, Socrates would agree that "superstition, the natural enemy of philosophy, may arm itself with the weapons of philosophy and thus transform itself into pseudo-philosophy... People may become so frightened of the ascent to the light of the sun, and so desirous of making that ascent utterly impossible to any of their descendants, that they dig a deep pit beneath the cave in which they were born, and withdraw into that pit."⁹ They would interpret the descent into the pit as a progress over "ancient" or "medieval" superstition. The original "cave" is un-Socratic blindness to one's ignorance. The artificially created ignorance of the "pit" springs from the rejection of the Socratic quest implicit in unquestioning acceptance of the two dogmas informing modern education. Consequently, the main problem of contemporary education is to devise means of ascent from the artificial "pit" to the "cave" into which men are born by nature. For only men convinced that knowledge of the good is possible can become knowledgeable about their own ignorance of it. In any case, the goal of genuine education remains that wonder or openness before the ultimate questions stirred up by true knowledge of ignorance. Insofar as a school or an academic discipline contributes to the acquisition of that openness, its existence is justified in the eyes of thoughtful men.

8. Plato, *Republic*, 504D9-506A8; *Theaetetus*, 166C1-167D4, 169D3-8, 171D1-172B6, 177C6-179A9; Klein, pp. 215-218.

9. L. Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, 1952), pp. 155-156; *Philosophie und Gesetz*, (Berlin, 1935), pp. 13-14 (note 1), 46.

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