The Liberal Arts: Detractors and Defenders

Humane studies as a preparation for the dawning age.

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UNTIL THE PRESENT CENTURY, the curriculum in American schools and colleges was determined by men who were solidly trained in the liberal arts and who insisted upon a solid liberal-arts curriculum at all educational levels. During the past thirty years, however, the curriculum has passed into the hands of men who for the most part neither possess a liberal education nor understand the importance of it. As a result, liberal-arts training in both the high schools and colleges, despite certain hopeful signs in the last year or so, stands in danger of being almost eliminated.

The two most powerful forces which have reduced the role of the liberal arts are educationism and vocationism. Educationism dominates the grade schools and high schools, where for two basic reasons it prevents the student from getting a sound liberal arts training: first, it requires that the student spend a large portion of his time studying subjects which bear no relation whatsoever to the liberal arts but which are said to contribute much to adjusting him to life; second, in accordance with a perversion of the democratic ideal, it requires that in the classroom all should be taught what all can learn, i.e., what the dull student can learn, so that what little training the student does receive in the liberal arts is highly diluted. Vocationism, though it has also affected the high school curriculum, ranges far more widely in the universities. It requires that the student spend not merely some, — but most, of his college career learning the minutiae of professional skills.

To a very great extent the proponents of the liberal arts, especially those of the faculty and administration of the colleges and universities in this country, are themselves responsible for the decline of the liberal arts. They have failed to defend their position effectively and have allowed educationists and vocationists to usurp their authority and to place upon the curriculum the stamp of extreme contemporaneity. The few who have spoken with some emotion in defense of the liberal arts have, for the most part, done so in very vague terms. They say that a liberal education "broadens the student's horizons" or that it "develops the whole man" or that it "teaches the student to think." Such phrases have now become slogans, but they

are hardly sufficient to curb the influence of educationist and vocationist thinking.

At the risk of raising some objections, I should like to propose a rationale for a liberal education which might be concrete enough and specific enough to contribute something toward an accurate analysis of current problems in the quality of American education. This rationale of a liberal education may be said to proceed from the recognition that truth is the end of all knowledge, that knowledge itself is the apprehension of fact, and that the universe is made up of a complex of facts so vast that the human mind cannot comprehend it at a single glance but must abstract from this complex those truths which contribute most to an understanding of nature, of man and society, and of God. These major truths, which might be called *first order truths,* have two major characteristics in common: (1) they are irreducible, i.e., they cannot be accounted for by higher orders of truth, and (2) they must make the widest contribution possible to the comprehension of the universe as a whole.

Now the number of these first order truths is not large. Francis Bacon, in an attempt to catalogue all knowledge in the early seventeenth century, and with a long tradition behind him, reduced the number to four: theology, history, philosophy, and literature. These subjects, together with the fine arts, are commonly known as the humanities; but the humanities are only a part, though the most important part, of the liberal arts curriculum. Since Bacon's time mathematics has likewise been found to contribute in an important way to our knowledge of the universe, and so have the sciences of physics, chemistry, and biology. One must also include the truths of language in this list, for language is the instrument for recording and communicating knowledge. Without fear of widespread disagreement, then, one may conclude that there are seven major ways of thinking: theologically, philosophically, aesthetically, historically, scientifically, mathematically, and linguistically. Other ways of thinking appear to be less important and less valuable.

The main thing to realize in this concept of the nature of truth is that there is a whole hierarchy of truths. Just as there are a number of first order truths, so also there are lower orders which might be designated as second, third, and fourth order truths, and so on. Astronomy, for example, might be thought of as a second order truth because although we can learn a good deal about the universe if we can think astronomically, yet astronomy is heavily dependent upon the truths of physics and mathematics. Similarly, sociology is perhaps a second order truth at best because although we may possibly learn something about human society if we can think sociologically, yet we can learn far more about the nature of man if we can think historically or philosophically. Among the second order truths, then, might be placed the major descriptive sciences and the social sciences. But even the number of second order truths, though they cannot perhaps be identified positively, is limited, and the value of courses in a college curriculum which deal with them is relatively high.

Identifying the areas of knowledge which ought to be included in the lower orders of truth becomes increasingly difficult in proportion as they are farther removed from first order truths. Such college courses, for example, as marketing, history of education, meteorology, statistics and other subjects of that degree of specialization might be thought of as dealing with third or fourth order truths. The more technical and specialized the subject the lower the order of truth with which it deals. A course in "Job Analysis and Improvement of Office Procedures" or "Evaluation in the Social Studies" or "Organization and Administration of Audio-Visual Programs" or any of literally hundreds of such courses listed in university catalogues deal with very low orders of truth indeed.

This view of truth will perhaps contribute something to clarifying the definition of a liberal education. For one thing it

becomes clear that a liberal education ought to be defined primarily in terms of the subjects to be learned rather than the motive for learning them. One often hears the argument that any sort of knowledge, even knowledge of how to train race horses, contributes to a student's liberal education provided that his motive is to acquire this knowledge for its own sake rather than to train race horses himself. But thinking of this kind merely obfuscates the meaning of a liberal education, and furthermore is dangerous because it plays directly into the hands of the educationists and vocationists. Actually a whole hierarchy of motives for learning may be established. A student may, for example, wish to learn (1) because by learning he can best fulfill his nature and therefore best glorify God, (2) because he believes that learning promotes virtuous action, (3) because he regards knowledge as its own end, i.e., a good in itself, (4) because he wants to earn a good living, or (5) because he would rather stay in school than go to work. The motive is important, but it is also private and therefore does not determine the nature of a liberal education. The subjects a student must study to acquire a liberal education are theology, philosophy, history, literature (and the fine arts), mathematics, the basic sciences, and languages—or at least as many of these as possible. The descriptive sciences and especially the social sciences make a very limited contribution to his liberal education. Most others make none at all, or virtually none.

Now it is necessary to understand that a student who receives a sound training in the liberal arts does not merely learn a mass of facts; he also learns to think in the seven important ways of thinking so that he can bring his knowledge to bear upon professional problems or indeed any other kind of problems which he will later on encounter. The man with a sound liberal arts training is the man who possesses considerable skill in being able to think theologically, philosophically, aesthetically, historically, mathematically, scientifically, and linguistically. Whoever cannot think effectively in at least three or four of these ways cannot be said to have a good liberal arts education or indeed to be well educated at all.

It is not always easy to understand how low orders of truth are dependent upon high orders of truth, but an illustration will perhaps suggest the relationship. Let us suppose that an advertising executive is trying to decide whether a certain television commercial will boost sales. If he studies the statistics of current trends he will be thinking mathematically; if he compares it with similar commercials used in the past, he will be thinking historically; if he considers the attractiveness of it he will be thinking aesthetically; if he considers the degree of truth of it, he will be thinking scientifically; if he considers the effect of the words upon the audience he will be thinking linguistically; and if he should happen to consider the honesty of it, he will be thinking philosophically, i.e., ethically. Now the thinking of an advertising executive is no doubt a good deal more intuitive and less systematic than this illustration suggests, but the value of his decision is likely to depend upon how well he has been trained to think in these ways. Thus it is the courses he takes in mathematics, history, literature and the fine arts, science, languages, and philosophy which will make him a good advertising executive, not so much the courses he takes in advertising.

Such a view of truth as outlined above can do much to challenge educationist and vocationist thinking. It will suggest, for example, why the so-called "practical" courses, both in high school and college are frequently the least practical and why the truly practical courses are the liberal arts courses. It also makes clear that what both the educationists and vocationists are doing is substituting courses which deal with very low orders of truths for those which deal with the highest orders. The high school student who takes a course in "Family Living" is not only incompetent

to deal with even theoretical problems in family living; he is being deprived of the opportunity of learning to think in the valuable ways which will increase his competence to deal with such problems. "Life adjustment" education, as the educationists conceive it, is thus the worst possible kind of education for adjusting students to life. In fact, if it long continues, there may in time no longer be any life to adjust to.

Similarly, when, on the university level, vocationists recommend that a future businessman take a course in "Analysis of Financial Statements" or that a future school administrator take a course in "Curriculum Construction in Secondary Education" they are in effect recommending that the student spend time studying subjects which in no important way contribute to his training in thinking in the ways which will increase his competence in analyzing financial statements or constructing high school curricula, but which indeed deprive him of the time to study the liberal arts subjects which will increase that competence. The typical business major or education major or journalism major or any other kind of undergraduate professional major, whether his professors admit it or not, is being given a highly limited training for a professional role which will therefore afford limited responsibilities and limited opportunities, or which he will carry out with limited effectiveness.

Now, one may argue, with some justice, that universities should not turn out future businessmen or future engineers who have learned nothing about the specific problems of business or engineering. The solution would appear to relegate all professional training to the graduate schools or to on-the-job training, but in most professions except law and medicine the undergraduate curriculum as now set up is presumably designed to give the student both a liberal and a professional education. The difficulty is that in practice the student's program usually works out to be about fifteen per cent liberal and eighty-five per cent professional, or at least non-liberal.

But what is most disturbing is that the inescapable truth that the proper training for professional leadership is a solid liberal education manages to escape both the student and the vocationists who set up his curriculum. It did not escape Francis Bacon, that utilitarian *par excellence,* who on this point observed that "expert men can execute, and perhaps judge of particulars, one by one; but the general counsels, and the plots and marshalling of affairs come best from those that are learned."

Why has this inescapable truth also escaped the educationists? In part, the answer lies in the melancholy fact that the vast majority of them are themselves not learned men, not learned in Bacon's sense of the term, which is the true sense—i.e., they do not have a sound liberal arts training. Among the increasing number of books and articles which criticize the administrators of our grade schools and high schools, few have hit hard at their most vulnerable point, namely their own lack of learning. Whoever investigates the kind of training which influential educationists generally receive will learn that in their graduate work, if they hold a Master of Arts in education or an EdD, as most do, they commonly receive no training in the liberal arts subjects whatsoever, and if they happen to have majored in education as undergraduates, they received precious little there too. What is even more saddening and more ominous for the future of our educationist-administered schools are the statistics reported by William H. Whyte, Jr. in *The Organization Man* (pp. 83-84). These statistics show that among 339,000 students tested in 1951 by the Educational Testing Service in connection with the army's draft deferment program, only about 27% of those majoring in education achieved a passing score of 70 or more, a far smaller percentage than that reported for any other group. Even more appalling is the report on IQ scores of graduate students in education, i.e., students who are the most likely to acquire influential positions in school administra-

tion. The report shows that in the tests administered by the Commission on Human Resources and Advanced Training, those working for advanced degrees in education made up 46% of the bottom fifth of all graduate students tested.

The truth is that, by and large, the general counsels and the plots and marshalling of the affairs of American high school and grade school education are coming from those who are not learned. As a result those not trained to think competently in any of the important ways of thinking tend to underestimate the importance of being able to think in those ways and are therefore highly susceptible to the philosophical principles which inform life adjustment education.

The really great tragedy in American education, then, is not merely the replacing the study of the highest orders of truth with low orders, but the confusing the one with the other; the sincere belief of both educationists and vocationists that the specialized, the "practical," the non-liberal, the servile courses contain the sum and substance of the knowledge which determines the success of the citizens of this country, including its professional leaders, both in their lives and in their work.

And yet perhaps we seriously underestimate the intellectual strength of this country if we believe that our educational system cannot be overhauled. The first step in the overhauling is to recognize that the educationists and the vocationists must not be left to do the job themselves. They have built their empire upon the sand of their own educational philosophy, a philosophy which opposes the liberal arts both in theory and in practice. What is more, they are dedicated men, dedicated to a degree unknown to most liberal arts advocates. Hope for an effective school system therefore can come only from outside pressures.

In the past few years these pressures have been gradually building up. Vocationists are having to answer to increasing complaints from professional leaders that vocationist-trained students in medicine, in law, in engineering, in business, and indeed in virtually all professions are seriously deficient in the liberal arts training necessary for competence in these professions. But the complaints are not yet loud enough because vocationism is not yet old enough so that the damage it does to professional competence can be accurately assessed. Only our present professional leaders can assess this damage and convince the universities of the evils of vocationism. These things they must do—and soon.

Prospects for rooting out educationist thinking are perhaps somewhat better than for rooting out vocationist thinking. For several years highly educated men like Arthur Bestor and Albert Lynd and Mortimer Smith have been warning of the dangers of educationism and its harmful influences upon American schools and hence upon America itself, as have other proponents of the liberal arts among professional men and parents and organizations such as the Council for Basic Education. The recent challenge of Russian technology has dramatized the weaknesses of educationist thinking to such a degree that pressures in the past year or two have mounted on all sides: the President has invited local school authorities to compare the rigors of the Russian curriculum to their own; the Vice-President has pointed out that the main problem in American education is the improvement in the *quality of training*; leading scientists and other professional men, some parents, and a few congressmen have also attacked practices which are the products of educationist thinking.

The educationists have perforce yielded a little to these pressures—but only a little, and they have done virtually nothing to strengthen the humanities program in the schools. In isolated instances they have tightened the curriculum a bit by adding an extra course or two in mathematics or the sciences for those who might care to take them, or they may have strengthened the foreign language program somewhat. But one cannot look for any alteration in

the anti-intellectual philosophy which informs the curriculum so long as educationists remain in charge of our schools. Most of them are spending their energies on what might be called "Operation Face-Saving" or even on reassuring us that all is well in American education.

The result is that the increasing pressures still fall far short of what is needed to dislodge educationism from its commanding role in the American school system. The chief difficulty is that these pressures have not been exerted in the right places. The only effective way of releasing the hold of educationist thinking upon the nation's schools is to repeal state certification laws which require teachers to take an inordinate number of education courses in order to be "qualified" to teach. These required courses are taught by educationists who pass along to prospective teachers the educationist theories which they learned in schools of education whose faculty and administrators are also educationists. The chain of educationist influence is thus unbroken, and weaknesses in it are not readily discernible because all of its links are equally weak. But the repeal of these certification laws would bring about the collapse of the whole educationist empire like a column of dominoes.

Now one cannot quite take the position that the influence of this educationist coterie upon our schools has been wholly deleterious, but it is a dangerous misapprehension to regard their influence as a whole as a sure sign of educational progress. Educationism is far more accurately conceived as a cancerous growth which has seriously weakened the American school system and which can be cured only by surgery.

Few state legislators realize perhaps that the future health of American grade school and high school education is to a large extent in their hands. Many of them, no doubt, like many parents and members of school boards, do not find it easy to free themselves from the notion that the best teachers are those who have taken a lot of courses which presumably teach them how to teach. Yet with the exception of a carefully planned program of practice teaching and possibly a solid course in the history of education there is hardly a course offered by schools of education that can be said to contribute in any important way to the training of teachers. Teaching must necessarily be an *art*, but educationists in education courses seek to reduce it to a *science*. What these education courses do, however, is consume time which the prospective teacher should be spending on his liberal arts training, for in few professions is a solid liberal arts background more important than in teaching. Bright students know that the content and value of courses in education are negligible, and this awareness leads them, as the previously quoted statistics suggest, into every profession except teaching or school administration, the very fields where talented students are perhaps most needed.

What we must solemnly hope for, then, is that large numbers of liberal arts proponents, particularly in high university places, will begin to state the case for the liberal arts more forcefully and more frequently than they have done heretofore. They must explain that a sound liberal education is the only effective training not only for all students bound for college or professional careers, but also for the vast majority of students who are not; and they must convince educationist-minded teachers and parents—and above all, state legislators—that life adjustment education is not only poor preparation for adjusting to life but also poor preparation for good citizenship.

Thus far, liberal arts proponents have been little disposed to do these things. Not only have they been hiding their light under a bushel; sometimes they appear to have lost the bushel. Rarely have such powers of eloquence been so ineloquently silent. But when they do break silence, as they are profoundly obligated to do, they will discover a great many active allies among professional leaders, legislators,

members of school boards, teachers, and even a few enlightened school administrators to support their position.

The ultimate aim of their combined efforts ought to be (1) to repeal state teacher certification laws, and (2) to restore the curriculum to those to whom it properly belongs and to whom until the past quarter century it has always belonged in all periods and in all countries, i.e., to fully educated men who understand the importance of a liberal arts education and who know what a student must do to get it. The proposal to restore a sound liberal arts program to the curriculum of our schools and colleges is not, as some may be disposed to believe, a harkening back to the past; it is, on the contrary, urgent and essential preparation for the grim challenge of the future.