

# *The Pervasive Peanut*

FRANK R. HARRISON

IN THE GUIDELINES for promotions and appointments of a large state university, the following is found:

The *raison d'être* of The University is to provide superior quality in the performance of three major functions of a modern state university, viz, (1) the communication of knowledge to students, the development in them of the comprehension and skills necessary to continue the quest for knowledge, and the training of students for entry into the professions and scholarly disciplines (teaching and practice); (2) the discovery and communication of significant new knowledge (research and scholarly publications); (3) the outreach to the application of knowledge to the solution of public problems (public service program).

It does not matter whether—yes or no—this “statement of purpose” is found in an official manual of a particular institution of higher education; similar statements are discovered in a number of various publications of different institutions, books concerning higher education, professional journals, and the like. This statement of purpose, then, portrays a rather typical contemporary attitude among administrators and faculty . . . if not also students . . . concerning the primary, if not total, purposes and goals of present day higher education in

the United States. “Training,” “Research,” “Service” are the key terms to be remembered! It is interesting to note that the word “education”, is not used in the above statement of purpose.\*

In large part, present day higher education is viewed as being external both to the instructor and the student. The instructor is presented a set—perhaps ill-defined—of problems to be solved through the manipulation of particular bits of information, mathematical and quasi-mathematical schemes, and/or various pieces of hardware. He is then expected to serve as the harbinger of his results to his own peer group, his students, and the general society. The student, on the other hand, is faced with various bits of information, or “facts,” to be memorized and assimilated into cognitive and manual skills to be mastered and performed. The student may be viewed as an input-output information processing system which, given certain data, will perform in certain ways. The student-machine is viewed as something with a “memory bank” to be filled with atomic-like bits of information, and then given a “program” whereby these may be arranged and re-arranged in order to solve a problem that has also been input into the student-machine. Education becomes instruction and training seen as instilling manipulative skills operative on independent “facts.”

An example of this instructor-student stance may be easily imagined in agricultural economics, although cases could be readily drawn from science, technology, and the liberal arts. Consider the following example. In order "to stimulate the economy" of a certain section of the country, we need to discover more by-products made from the peanut. The problem is presented to the researchers at the state university, and perhaps to some faculty members at smaller, private institutions. The researchers ponder the problem of the peanut and determine a government grant is in order and somewhat needed. Pre-research research is carried out so that a plausible proposal may be written in the official, bureaucratic jargon and submitted to Washington. This is done, and in due time the grant is awarded. Time, equipment, and graduate students are bought with the grant money. Everyone begins to pounce upon the problem of the peanut. Indeed, after some time and effort have been expended, new by-products are discovered.

Having accomplished these "break-throughs," the information is now disseminated in various ways. The directors of the peanut project have of course written government progress reports, but they also have produced several articles concerning the chemical structure of the peanut shell, plastics and the peanut, peanuts and pigs, and the like. They have even joint authored a book dealing with "potential peanut possibilities." The graduate students involved in the peanut project each have run several statistical studies—one dealing with the relations of the length of peanuts to the thickness of the shell, another with the width of peanuts in relation to the thickness of the shell, and a third correlating the results of the length *and* width of the shell to the thickness of the peanut. These statistical studies become the individual student's dissertation, each student obtaining his Ph.D. that spring. Information arising out of the project is also professed at the undergraduate level through the lecture-quiz system. Slides are used showing intricate cross sections of various peanuts, thus involving the art department in a "scientific" project. The undergraduates are informed how a whole novel taxonomy of peanut

shells was developed in the course of the research. They are, of course, expected to memorize this new categorization. The political science department introduces courses dealing with politics and the peanut. The economics department gives classes in world food shortage and the economical peanut. The English department lectures on "poems of the peanut." Members of the philosophy department lecture on "ecology, peanuts, and a world of changing values." And finally, but perhaps not last, representatives of 4-H and the agriculture cooperative extension division take the new information into the field where it is put to immediate, practical uses. Here the Baconian shibboleth that "knowledge is power" is clearly operative.

Such examples encapsulate the ultimate goals and procedures in seemingly a great part of higher education in today's American Acropolis.

Soon other institutions begin to emulate the peanut procedure, by introducing, perhaps, new methods of quantitative measurement. When smaller universities and colleges cannot carry out such programs because, say, of the lack of manpower and/or facilities, they nonetheless attempt to imitate. In areas of study where neither emulation nor imitation of applied methods and practical results is possible, failure to survive becomes all but certain—if for no other reason than not having immediate practical applications to the equally immediate and practical world-of-affairs such areas will be ignored. In "non-applied disciplines" student enrollment usually drops while faculty positions and support funds are granted to "more viable" sectors of training, research, and service. All seem to be mesmerized by the example of a discipline that allows for seemingly clear-cut methods of training and research procedures, a product produced by that research, the marketing of that product, and the quantitative means to determine the impact of the marketable product on the society at large.

While it may appear evident to the soft-headed that reading, studying, and enjoying a moving play of Shakespeare, while far removed from the *type of procedure* involved in the

peanut project, is, nonetheless, valuable, this is not considered the sane, sensible view by many contemporary administrators, instructors, and students. A more acceptable and accepted view is that there is no hiatus between the way we study peanuts and the way we study Shakespeare . . . if we study Shakespeare at all. At most there is only a matter of degree in that we may be more readily able to quantify our peanut results. Such a view is often acceptable and accepted not only in the sciences and technology by their practitioners, but also as well in both the liberal and fine arts. What could be "more important" than a statistical analysis, most assuredly employing a large computer, of the uses of the definite article versus the indefinite one in Shakespeare's plays?! We are seriously invited to consider most acutely this question. Here we glimpse a common and maleficent attitude of the instructor in the arts—liberal and fine; namely, that he may secretly—and often not so secretly—desire to metamorphose into a "scientist," that is his, often ill-conceived, notion of a scientist.

Training, research, packaging, dissemination, quantification of results—all of this may be viewed as an external matter to the instructor, the student, the researcher, and the beneficiaries of that instruction and research. For it is important to grasp that in the contemporary view of education it is generally held that *I* am quite distinct both from what I *know*—facts—and what I am able to *do*—skills. In such a context it is *not* sophistical to say, for instance, "Oh, he'll never be much of a human being—but he will make an excellent politician," or "Oh, he'll never be much of a person—but he is an excellent technician." Within much of the contemporary instructional framework such comments find their natural home. That they do ought to serve as a moral *reductio ad absurdum* for the contemporary stance we have been considering. Unfortunately, for the majority this does not appear to be the case. Many people today, either within the walls of academe or without, simply do not grasp an absurdity in claiming a given individual can be both a bad, or mediocre, human being and at the same moment a good anything else. After all we are instilled with the opposite

view. We can, it seems, function like a programmed machine; function very well at our daily drills and yet still be a non-person. And surely, it is said, we must not let "subjective values" of certain sorts spoil our objectivity and scientific attitudes. And this warning does have its value—but also its danger. How carefully and completely we have separated functions from that which functions! Our behavior, actions, jobs performed are seen to be one thing. We, as moral, aesthetic, and social beings, are quite another. We are told, trained, and consequently fervently believe, that one has little or nothing to do with the other. Yet, such a view as this is nothing less than an extremely illuminating symptom of the malignant metastasis hastily extending itself throughout education and society.

Higher education in America is currently producing brilliantly trained physicians, attorneys, engineers, businessmen, etc., who have had at best only minimal exposure to any sense of moral, aesthetic, and social values. Having little or no sense of such values—but only immediate pragmatic ends—their *work* becomes an ultimate end in itself. A person is thought to be what he does, and when he does nothing he is nothing. Note that retired people often view themselves as non-persons. Or, housewives may feel themselves to be non-entities; the laid-off person, worthless. They do not have a "real job." A person's job often is like a game in which the player becomes so utterly involved that he becomes a slave to the game he helps—or does—create! And the games we play may seem to have little contact with what can loosely be called "reality." Higher education plays similar games while *becoming* equally divorced from a discoverable universal order in the world. There has been a growing attempt to replace such order by a self-sustaining neurotic cycle of discovering and manipulating facts as ends in themselves to promote *more* facts. Our "game theory" becomes our "reality."

The more generally accepted contemporary vision of what higher education is *all* about is wrong—devastatingly wrong. *Education*, primarily, should be recognized as an internal matter—one of the most vital concerns of the

person. The pursuit of truth, beauty, goodness through education must be seen as identical with the search for value *in me, in you, in our world*. Truth, beauty, goodness . . . intrinsic values . . . are three aspects of the same reality. To disrupt or ignore one part is to do dolorous violence to the whole. A great, if not *the great*, tragedy of our time is that we have driven the wedge between them and have thus disconnected them from the very core of our being. In doing so we leave only a moribund body which we hasten to *call* vibrant. This, coupled with our insane passion for quantitative measurement, has completely relativized truth, beauty, goodness while also reducing them to the most vulgar of probabilities. For truth we have substituted short-termed practicality; for goodness *our cherished opinions and prejudices*; beauty has utterly fled our understanding and feeling. Consequently, we often thrash about in a maelstrom of our own creating, while believing that we are victims of some pernicious forces beyond our control.

In these days we live in a "practical age," and our institutions of higher education both reflect and propagate this attitude. Here practicality is understood in terms of immediate jobs to be performed dealing with external "matters of consequent" demanding our attention here and now. The contemporary practical problem may be put in this way: How to obtain more goods, quantitatively measure, to satisfy quickly our insatiable appetite for things? It is all but universally assumed that the quality of our life is largely summed up in terms of how much we have in concrete possessions, money, credit, power, influence, other humans and the like. Quality is identical, with little or no remainder, to quantity.

In this contemporary arena higher education often primarily collects and produces knowledge, *i.e.* measurement and calculation, and then spreads it forth believing it has served well both itself and the public weal. In doing this, we may question whether higher education has not damned many. We may well ask whether higher education has not been instrumental in snatching from many their birthright to be human beings in any full sense. In place of helping someone *be* a human being, higher

education offers the opportunity to *do* some job. But, of course, I can *do* something, perform well some function, and still *be* a nobody. Machines are very good at just this sort of thing. What good, what use, however, is a machine which does nothing, which fabricates no tangible product? None! Our contemporary society often urges the same view of a person who does nothing, makes nothing. In this context the purpose of higher education becomes the *training* of students for particular jobs. Yet some ask, what of leading the individual student out of ignorance *and* aiding in his discovery of himself as someone supremely important no matter what his specific training and job? What of *education*?

Lest it be supposed I am merely fulminating against a straw man, permit me to point out that I am *not* suggesting we must give up the world in order to gain our souls. One does not have to surrender the bathtub—or other features of indoor plumbing—in order to become a "real human being." Nor is being trained for a job, or to perform a particular task or group of tasks, demeaning in and of itself. Quite the contrary! Whether a person does research or not or whether he is trained in a specific job or not, *in and of itself* does not necessarily determine his inner, intrinsic values. Yet, what a person loves and cherishes does. We do become what we love! Much of today's higher education instills in us primarily a love for *only* the externalities of life. Loving only those things which can be measured and calculated, our sole "values" are likely to be only those of grasping and possession. This should be no surprise. Of course the situation cannot be helped by the simplistic attempt, often taken by the "humanist," to do away with "sciencism," "job training," etc., and assume what may be called an anti-rational posture. No, that extreme path leads to its own sorrow. Rather we must see and appreciate that first of all the truly most practical concern for us is our development as human beings in the fullest sense. In this context let research, dissemination of knowledge, possessions, power, job training and all the rest find their rightful places.

In this essay I have noted that today's higher education is viewed largely as an external mat-

ter. While it is viewed in this way, nonetheless the fact of the situation is that we, as human beings, are formed by a particular type of education or lack of it. We cannot escape this. But, what we perhaps forget is that we may be more easily ill-formed than properly shaped. Institutions of higher education should be among the primary places where individuals, and society, are fashioned for the better. Unfortunately, they frequently are not. Such institutions habitually do not lead, but follow, the dictates and appetites of the contemporary society in which they are situated. Today, many American institutions cannot lead for the simple reason they have no vision of any *intrinsic* goals and values. In keeping with this, the contemporary ideal of an "educator" is often one who does *not* seek out and show forth in his work and life any intrinsic goals and values, but rather a person who simply "presents the

\*The "peanut parody" may appear ridiculous to some; all too close to home to others. Some may say that many of my remarks are "unfair" and "ill-balanced," while others say "not enough." But, no essay of this general sort will hit the center of every target. Hopefully, however, this essay may stimulate *you* clearly to consider why you have the specific reaction to it which you do.

In this piece I sometimes use the term "higher education" in an unqualified way. Certainly, this usage is loose insofar as it suggests that there is *a* unified, harmonious "thing" in the United States which may be called "higher

facts." How can such institutions and instructors fashion anything for the better when either they ignore questions of "the better" or hold them to be indications of softer-headed superstitions? "Practicality" is the key and that means in large part giving the public what it thinks it wants. Yet, if we who are concerned with institutions of higher education continue to insist that it is little or none of our affair to search after and consider moral, aesthetic, and social values, historical and religious truths, philosophical searching into ourselves, and the like, but solely to grow better peanuts, then the net results of this folly can only be that we shall have a very impoverished society of machine-like individuals—individuals who in fact *do* a great deal while yet *being* nothing either to themselves or anyone else. In that case we shall not only eventually lose our souls, but our peanuts as well.

education." There is not. But, there are some more-or-less general trends and characteristics which *are* found in many institutions of higher education in this country. Some of these trends and characteristics I have underscored in this paper.

In connection with this polemical essay, one may also wish to read the following: Harrison, Frank R., "Plucking Minerva's Owl," *Modern Age*, Vol. 21, No. 2, Spring 1977, pp. 173-183; Miller, Eugene F., "Activism and Higher Education—A Socratic View," *The Journal of General Education*, Vol. 23, October 1971, pp. 201-219.