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Some Reflections on the Philosophy of Education

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Some Reflections on the Philosophy of Education

by

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The university is not the world. In the world, if you explore problems which turn out to be of considerable interest to others, but never publicly recommend practical solutions to those problems, you may forfeit a chance to become famous, perhaps to become a successful politician, or even to become (what may not be quite the same thing) a recognized benefactor of mankind; but in the university, it is not impossible that you may become a full professor. This paper, as its title suggests, is intended as commentary on a few of education's problems and dilemmas; it is not an attempt to present an exhaustive analysis of them, nor a vehicle urging adoption of procedures aimed at solving them. Should this lead you to think that it must then surely be only of limited practical value, I would say that those of us who enjoy doing this sort of thing believe it would be friendlier of you to think of it as a kind of pure research.

After first touching briefly on the minor matter of the apparent unpopularity of the philosophy of education in certain quarters, I shall consider two questions, one concerning educational philosophy at the public school level historically, and the other at the higher education level currently, and offer comments on both:

(1) How could so many of the philosophical ideas and educational proposals of John Dewey come to produce an influence on public education which Dewey himself acknowledged to be, at least in part, anti-intellectual in character and antithetical to the best interest of pupils?

(2) What are some of the important philosophical issues arising from current trends toward egalitarianism and vocationalism in higher education, as they come into conflict with traditional interpretations of the curricular role of the liberal arts and the principle of exclusivity?

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One of the striking things about the philosophy of education is the relatively low status assigned to it in the hierarchy of scholarly subjects. This surely is a matter of no great importance, but its brief consideration provides me with the opportunity to consider a number of negative reactions to the field, for whatever use they may have in sharpening our critical judgments of it.

It is no secret that of all the birds in philosophy's curricular nest, educational philosophy is considered by a majority of philosophy professors to be the ugliest duckling. Just why this is so, no one seems to be entirely sure. If pressed, some are willing to state privately that the philosophy of education, at least as a subject to be taught, has more than its fair share of those unattractive characteristics which, rightly or wrongly, occasionally are attributed to other fields of philosophical inquiry: i.e., too many of its issues are irreducibly imprecise, leading unavoidably to excessive speculation by everyone; the field has the reputation of attracting those who tend to be enthusiasts or apologists; too many theoretical proposals in the area seem to have no apparent practical application; much of what has been done in the field has been too utopian, too pedantic, too dated, or perhaps just too endlessly boring; etc. All professors of philosophy agree, of course, that educational philosophy has commanded the serious attention of at least a few of the greatest
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and most influential philosophers in the West, from Plato to Russell -- as well as a number of admittedly successful and distinguished philosophers now alive and writing. Nor does anyone hesitate to acknowledge that its investigation surely does not exclude (and indeed may require) consideration of certain familiar questions and problems which are of perennial interest to philosophers, namely, questions about the nature of man and society, and problems of knowledge and value. While quite willing to recognize all this, some professors of philosophy still maintain that too much of what has been written under the educational philosophy label -- the important work of some of the more important philosophers perhaps excepted -- lacks proper intellectual rigor, often seems to be poorly informed philosophically, or seems over-concerned with the promotion of (1) a transparently naive view of human nature, or (2) with the urging of the use of organized education as a sure-cure for social malaise, or both.

To whatever extent we may agree or disagree with the above, I should hope that all of us would be sympathetic to the call for intellectual integrity implicit therein. Surely it is not unreasonable to ask (however much it might be unrealistic to expect) that writing in the field of educational philosophy -- or any other field, for that matter -- give evidence of being fairly well thought through and perhaps even agonized over; if it is to deserve critical respect. This is not to say that any series of proposals in the area of philosophy of education must have been so thoroughly analyzed as to have achieved logically demonstrable conclusions or have uncovered final answers for all of us to marvel at; on the contrary, it is only to say that there must be reason to believe that at least some tough-minded thinking has gone on here and there, and that the author has been reasonably successful in avoiding the edge of whatever intellectual axe he may be discovered grinding.

However that may be, I suspect that the unpopularity of educational philosophy with many philosophy professors is not really so much a matter of philosophical or intellectual standards of judgment; it may be more than a little psychological. Professors of philosophy, like most of the rest of mankind, prefer success to failure, and in teaching it is commonly believed that successful instruction has something to do with the attitudes and interests of the students. The students who are most likely to have the philosophical interests and at least the beginning of the background of knowledge which should permit professors of philosophy to exercise their hard-won expertise most effectively in the classroom, are those students majoring in philosophy at the undergraduate or graduate levels of instruction. But philosophy majors seldom seem to select courses in educational philosophy, possibly because such courses promise to be of little help in preparing for advanced work in logic, epistemology, metaphysics, value theory, or the inevitable seminars in Wittgenstein and Kant. On the other hand, a typical student group one might find enrolled in an educational philosophy class often includes a sizeable sprinkling of Education majors, many of whom may have thus far succeeded in keeping free from philosophy as an academic subject, and some of whom may have accumulated serious doubts as to the importance of the study of theoretical matters. Faced too often with this, one may understand why some philosophy professors seem willing to abandon the time-honored principle of the balkanization of the disciplines, and may recommend that educational philosophy be offered, perhaps even exclusively if necessary, by the Education department.

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In the world outside the university, the ultimate worth of the philosophy of
education is measured according to the nature and degree of influence it brings to bear on educational practice. Opinion may be divided as to current levels of such influence, but intellectual historians agree that during the second quarter of the twentieth century the philosophical and educational ideas of John Dewey came to have an immense influence on American public education, possibly one of the most remarkable influences ever exercised by philosophical thought on public practice. There are many interesting facets to the story of this influence, and they justify a closer look.

Both the range and depth of Dewey's philosophical writings are impressive. His genius extends beyond educational philosophy to other important fields of inquiry, including logic, the philosophy of science, the philosophy of art, social theory, and more, but even his staunchest supporters and admirers would not insist that it extends with equal brilliance to his writing style. It cannot be denied that Dewey writes with dedication and thoroughness, and does not hesitate to attempt explanation of the most complex of issues, but he is not a popularizer, and it would be thought exceptional if someone were to claim to have been kept from a good night's sleep by the excitement of Dewey's prose. In his youth he was influenced by Hegel, with whom he came to disagree philosophically, but he never seemed to be able to free himself completely from what has been described as a somewhat Hegelian manner of expression, in which it is not impossible for a sentence to go on for most of a page before losing itself at last among the qualification and distinctions of a concluding subordinate clause.

How, then, we may reasonably ask, did his ideas come to have so profound an effect on public school teachers and other educational personnel, who would seem to have no special fondness for the abstruse? Diane Ravitch of Teachers College, Columbia University, recently put it as follows:

During the 1930's and 1940's, an adulterated version of John Dewey's educational philosophy became the reigning dogma of the educational profession. Why this was so is less easy to ascertain than the fact that it was so. Perhaps it was because Dewey was the only first-rate philosopher who took a deep interest in elementary and secondary education; perhaps it was because Dewey's ideas were quickly and easily adapted to meet the problems of the public schools during a period of unprecedented expansion; perhaps it was because his ideas were like the proverbial "witches mirror," reflecting whatever the viewer saw in them.

Ravitch thus joins many writers now dealing with this period who have stated or at least implied that it really was not Dewey the ordinary educators were reading or listening to, but his popularizers and supporters from within the educational establishment. Textbooks on educational philosophy published during this period also supported the new education, sometimes contrasting the modern-day, Deweyan experimentalism they advocated with what was called "Idealism" on the one hand, or "Essentialism" on the other. Idealism was described as the point of view of philosophers who declare for the absolute and unchanging nature of reality and truth, apparently beginning with Plato's epistemology and doctrine of forms and proceeding through a modified version of nineteenth century Hegelianism. Essentialism, portrayed as equally unfortunate in its absolutistic tendencies, was seen as associated initially with Aristotle's analysis of man's nature, including the ethical and noetic virtues, and was described as the philosophy followed by those advocat-
ing a generally inflexible curriculum of “essential” subjects designed to accommodate man’s unchanging essence. Thus, the young public school teachers of the time, whose formal education had been completed in the Normal Schools and teacher’s colleges of the nineteen-thirties and nineteen-forties (which, to put it mildly, seldom left them with any extended familiarity with philosophical matters) were given the clear choice of accepting the modern, scientific, psychologically-oriented educational philosophy of progressivism, or being placed in the position of seeming to advocate an absolutism reported to be out-of-date by approximately twenty-three centuries. Progressivism had its critics, of course, and other points of view their advocates, but for many teachers, especially those seeking professional advancement through the winning of graduate degrees in universities and colleges where progressivism was championed, the choice was not very hard to make.

Ravitch again:

Misapplications of Dewey’s ideas finally provoked him to criticize his misinterpreters. In a book published in 1938, entitled Experience and Education, Dewey tried to set the record straight by rebuking those who thought that all experiences were equally educative, that following a student’s impulse was a substitute for educational purpose, that subject matter could be abandoned, that the past was irrelevant to the present and future, and that the teacher’s role was to avoid impinging on the spontaneous growth of the pupil.2

But for a time, at least, the self-appointed spokesman for Dewey triumphed over the old scholar’s last efforts. The movement, known variously as experimentalism (which Dewey preferred), progressive education (the popular label), progressivism, child-centered education, and so on, kept the momentum going well into the nineteen-fifties, when the U.S. Office of Education actively promoted what was called “Life Adjustment Education,” which advocated sweeping changes in both elementary and secondary school curricula. Its declared purpose was to “de-emphasize” the formal acquisition of knowledge and cognitive skills in order to stress practical “how to” courses, the development of social attitudes, and the training of students in “personal life adjustment” as family members, potential consumers, and citizens. This program, at least at the secondary school level, stimulated considerable criticism for a time, and at least under that title, did not long survive the Russian launching of Sputnik. But opponents pointed out that progressive education, which already had succeeded in coming to dominate much of public elementary school education, had found a foothold in the high school programs of the nation, and they predicted there would be an eventual deterioration in the academic preparation of those high school students who chose to attend college.

If the picture sketched above is not entirely inaccurate, the question arises as to how ideas coming from a first-rate mind such as Dewey’s could be so seriously misunderstood as to produce what Dewey himself recognized to be an anti-intellectual force affecting educational practices, a force he did his best to combat during the last days of his long and active life. One possible explanation, of course, is that Dewey was not so much misunderstood as that he failed to win complete victory for his views, and that competing ideas achieved certain successes as well. I am sure that this matter is a complex one, but to the degree that one accepts the same view that Dewey did, namely, that many of his ideas were misinterpreted and many of his recommendations were misunderstood, I believe that much of the explanation may lie with two considerations, one related to the habits and practices of organ-
ized professions and professional institutions, and the other related to the self-de­
defensive persistence of broad social doctrines and beliefs. The first explanatory
consideration concerns (1) the tendency of professional organizations and institu­
tions to create and employ what I would call institutionalized action language,
(2) the processes by which ideas and doctrines are translated into such language, and
(3) the results of such translation. The second explanatory consideration concerns
the tendency of the currently dominant epistemological assumptions of a society
to absorb emerging ideas and doctrines in a way which permits those emerging
ideas and doctrines to be viewed as supporting the existing epistemological assump­
tions, rather than bringing them into question. In saying something about both
considerations, I shall suggest that the consequences of the former process in part
may gain definition and direction from the latter process.

An emerging doctrine which advocates institutional change, whether or not
it is judged at first to be appealing either as to content or style, is likely to become
a candidate for translation into institutionalized action language by those who
consider themselves responsible for providing institutional leadership and direction,
once the doctrine is judged to be sufficiently important. Judging the doctrine to be
sufficiently important, of course, means more than that it has been accorded a
certain respect; by “sufficiently important” I mean that the doctrine is seen as
promising either to serve or to defeat the interests of those doing the judging to a
significantly higher degree than any rival doctrine then emerging, or any other
existing doctrine. It does not really matter whether those doing the judging identi­
fy their own interests selfishly or altruistically -- that is to say, whether they are
concerned to promote their private gain on the one hand, or some selfless and
worthy institutional purpose on the other -- so long as the potential threats or
potential benefits of the doctrine are taken seriously; one may assume that motiva­
tion always is strongest in those instances when individuals discover that their pri­
ivate gain and the serving of their altruistic principles appear to coincide. By “insti­
tutionalized action language” I mean the kind of language considered to be most
effective in communicating with institution members while at the same time en­
couraging positive reactions to proposed action. If institutionalized action language
is to achieve these two purposes, it must be able to convey ideas in easily recog­
nizable and understandable forms, it must be sufficiently general as to promote
wide applicability and appeal, and it must not appear to threaten seriously either
the popularly-accepted purposes of the institution or the long-term interests of
institution members; in a word, it must become the subject matter for appealing
slogans, for the kind of short-hand communication which almost inevitably leads
to over-simplification.

I suggest that Dewey’s educational proposals, in the main, were characterized
by an abstract density of style which begged for exegesis, for conversion to a more
easily understood popular idiom, and that these educational proposals were taken
seriously by influential professors of Education in colleges and universities and by
leaders of professional teacher organizations and contributors to professional jour­
nals. It is not surprising that the ideas and proposals presented in his scholarly
writings became prime material for translation into institutionalized action language,
or that many of them were sufficiently simplified and generalized as to become
known in slogan form. Examining an hypothetical instance of the translation of a
complex idea into institutionalized action language is rather like watching a cliche
struggling to be born, so perhaps a single example will suffice. The following ex­
ccerpt is from Dewey’s How We Think:
Any teacher who is alive to the modes of thought operative in the natural experience of the normal child will have no difficulty in avoiding the identification of the logical with a ready-made organization of subject matter, as well as the notion that the way to escape this error is to pay no attention to logical considerations. Such a teacher will have no difficulty in seeing that the real problem of intellectual education is the transformation of natural powers into expert, tested powers: the transformation of more or less casual curiosity and sporadic suggestion into attitudes of alert, cautious, and thorough inquiry. He will see that the psychological and the logical, instead of being opposed to each other (or even independent of each other), are connected as the earlier and the terminal, or concluding stages of the same process. He will recognize, moreover, that the kind of logical arrangement that marks subject matter at the stage of maturity is not the only kind possible; that the kind found in scientifically organized material is actually undesirable until the mind has reached a point of maturity where it is capable of understanding just why this form, rather than some other, is adopted.

Translated into institutionalized action language and reduced to slogan, this becomes: "Teach children, not subject matter."

When we consider carefully what Dewey’s recommendations really were as to the place that subject matter should have in the educative process, the dangers of over-simplification inherent in the use of institutionalized action language becomes apparent. It is clear that his recommendations were neither unreasonable nor at all anti-intellectual in tone or intent. He began by suggesting that those who believe logical behavior to be foreign to the natural tendencies of children form two contrasting schools of thought. The first school would attempt to make children logical by presenting them with a logical analysis of a subject in matured scientific detail, thus failing to take into consideration important elements of the psychology of learning and discovery appropriate to the child’s age and level of intellectual development. The second school, which also believes logical thought to be foreign to children, thinks they become logical only through some natural process of maturation and development, not through the study of subject matter, and so encourages free self-expression, spontaneity, individualism, and the natural unfolding of the child’s interests.

Both these schools of thought Dewey thought to be wrong, for what seem in part to be psychological reasons. He took children to be logical in spirit and inclination, if not in technique. He advocated the acquisition of habits of logical techniques of thinking through encouraging the process of reflection, through meeting and overcoming genuine intellectual obstacles, through experimenting with ideas and testing them in practice -- through the achievement of intellectual independence at the child’s level of development. Unfortunately, the first half of this message -- that subject matter characterized by rigidly logical organization and matured development, to be “mastered” through memorization and drill, if necessary, would not make students logical but might very well make them bored -- was the message that got through. What often replaced the traditional approach to subject matter turned out to be what Dewey also had warned against: over-emphasis on the following expressed (or assumed) interests of the child (and so, a fortiori, on whatever proceeded from his freedom of expression), and so on a curriculum so flexible it might be seen as “emerging” from day to day, and week to week.
emerging curriculum generated a good deal of diversity, to put it mildly, and often placed final responsibility for program decision in the hands of the classroom teacher. At the beginning of the movement's popularity, I suspect that many, if not most, public school teachers probably did not deviate too radically from what they may have been accustomed to doing earlier, but some were surely more imaginative. I remember one sixth-grade teacher who believed that the "integration" of the child could only follow from the integration of the curriculum, and so used her new-found curricular freedom to plan the Fall semester around the topic of coal -- the children studied the geological origins of coal, the mining of coal, the chemistry of coal, the geography of coal, the economics of coal, the social implications of coal, and they wrote essays and poems about coal, and drew pictures of it. I have forgotten what was planned for the Spring semester. A junior-high school teacher I knew, who also was a Republican, when advised that he must not any longer follow textbooks in too rigid a fashion, discovered that he could best meet the needs of his pupils by preceding an investigation of the merits of Roosevelt's New Deal with a two-week survey of the decline and fall of the Roman empire.

Other Deweyan insights, as they became increasingly available in the form of institutionalized action language, became the conventional wisdom, and were repeated in numerous ways in professional journals and at professional meetings, and supported by colleges and schools of education in universities, professional organizations, state departments of education, and the U.S. Office of Education. Some of the slogans which became popular seemed to carry these insights to a level of logical absurdity which Dewey himself was unable to check. For example, his belief that practical experience provides an excellent way of learning for children as well as adults led to the adoption of teaching methodologies which glorified "doing" projects and demeaned "bookish" ones; his concern that the school should attempt to provide for the balanced development of the child, which became known as "meeting the needs of the whole child," led to the notion that the child's need for academic learning (a need which seldom seemed to place excessive strain on the child) was less important than any other need; that education was not just preparation for life, but was life itself for the child, was taken as justifying the rejection of educational procedures which failed to produce immediately obvious gratification for students; that education is growth and its purpose more growth became a reason for the teacher not to interfere too much in whatever natural processes might be going on; and so on.

It is clear that whenever complex ideas are converted to institutionalized action language and then eventually to slogans, the potential for trouble is at least three-fold: first, such slogans too often are too general or too vague to provide any kind of consistent guide for intelligent behavior, even in ordinary circumstances, to say nothing of complicated ones; second, they are likely to become the war-cries of those who care more for winning whatever battle they believe themselves engaged in, than for knowing why they are fighting one; and third, their use can lead to the eventual emergence of an increasingly pervasive orthodoxy, the final enthusiastic refinement of which can be a kind of fanaticism. The self-image of fanaticism invariably appears as an honorable and unswerving dedication to worthy principle, so that what may eventually turn out to be the rankest nonsense can, for a time, wear the twin masks of reason and virtue. How long this state of affairs continues would seem to be directly related to the length of time in which the repetition of slogans is permitted to substitute for the critical analysis of prior assumptions. Unfortunately, slogans more often seem to encourage action in preference to critical thinking ("the unexamined life is not worth living" surely is a notable exception) and aim
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more at generating attitudes of positive acceptance rather than attitudes of doubt and skepticism. Sincere slogan-making requires the holding of firm convictions as to the issues involved, and we need not be surprised to learn that those who are quite sure that they have the correct answers to all the important questions are not likely to consider wide diversity of opinion to be a social phenomenon requiring encouragement.

I shall not argue the question of whether, on the whole, Dewey's educational ideas left American public education better off than not, but I would agree with Dewey himself that the outcome was mixed, and that both his influence and the influence of those who misinterpreted him remain with us. I now turn to the second explanatory consideration I suggested had contributed to this mixed influence: the ways in which emerging ideas and concepts tend to be accommodated by the dominant epistemological assumptions of a society.

Dewey's brilliant defense of pragmatism, and his bold and uncompromising rejection of theoretical absolutes in all aspects of his philosophy, had a certain seductive appeal in that they seemed to be consistent with the beliefs about truth and knowledge held by the majority of Americans, who thought of themselves as practical men rather than theoreticians, as men of action rather than scholars. After all, if what really matters in achieving knowledge is not the mastery of someone else's elaborate theories, but rather the investigation of what happens in practice, then those who actively try things out are superior to those who only sit and think. The restless spirit of the American frontier takes it as certain that those most likely to succeed are those who dare, who experiment, who find a way of coming to terms with what is, as yet, unknown, namely, the changing demands of the future -- not those who only lay claim to have learned the lessons of the quite possibly irrelevant past. Commenting on Dewey's epistemology, his philosophy of experimentalism, and his denial of the possibility of absolute knowledge, F.S.C. Northrup wrote in 1947:

What Dewey's followers acquired was not his correct thesis that theory and its theoretical problems are as necessary a part of scientific inquiry as empirical evidence and experimental methods -- the theory merely being indirectly rather than directly and absolutely confirmed by experiment -- but the erroneous assumption that experimentation and an appeal to what happens in practice, without guiding theoretical principles, are alone what matters, both in science and in life. Thus the notion got abroad....that people facing the basic theoretical problems of science, philosophy, and culture were either antiquated old mossbacks or speculative armchair thinkers dealing with irrelevant pseudo-problems. The people who found thinking difficult, or who lacked the logical or mathematical training necessary to enable them to pursue it effectively, liked this suggestion since it lulled them into the complacent fool's paradise in which they were the scientific and effective people, and the theoretically directed, logically disciplined minds were the evil spirits.\textsuperscript{5}

Northrup goes on to say that some professors also liked this suggestion because it seemed to provide them with justification for an experimentally-sanctioned, universally-applicable methodology for teaching anything, even when their familiarity with the subject matter concerned might appear to be unduly limited.

During the decades when Dewey's philosophical writings presented his ideas
as to the tentative nature of knowledge, the experimental method of logical inquiry, and the practical necessities of reflective thinking, the popularly-accepted epistemology in America seemed to be that of the practical man, rather than the scholar, who saw truth as the end-product of common sense in reaction with those practical problems produced by rapidly changing times -- rather than seeing truth as the end-product of formal schooling -- and who thus valued practice above theory. I believe Dewey's ideas were easily absorbed by the spirit of the age to the degree that they could be interpreted as championing common sense and practical action, and as seeming to challenge what was viewed as overly-technical or overly-philosophical traditions of theoretical scholarship. I am, therefore, in basic agreement with Northrup -- in the main, what some of Dewey's supporters acquired was a theory of action which failed to incorporate a balanced Deweyan respect for the role of theory itself and the disciplinary effects and benefits of traditional scholarship.

Unfortunately, the tendency to dismiss theory en bloc also is the tendency to dismiss theories of analysis on which searching criticism is based. The vacuum created by the rejection of theoretical views more typical of an earlier period, such as religious Puritanism, with its accompanying pessimism as to man's helplessness and his essential depravity, was gradually filled with an increasing optimism which brought with it no balanced theoretical mode of critical analysis other than the prized common sense of the practical man -- a method of reasoning thought of as applicable to down-to-earth problem solving rather than the critical analysis of the Zeitgeist. As applied to educational theory, this lack of balance made room for a romantically optimistic view of the child as capable of a natural maturation toward the final achievement of human excellence, if given sufficient freedom from artificial restraints -- a view more reminiscent of Rousseau than Dewey, who continued to warn that there was nothing intellectually magical about reaching adolescence. Romantically optimistic faith did not center on human nature as its only object, however, but sometimes was placed in the seemingly unlimited and almost magical promise of the developing sciences -- such as the application of techniques of applied psychology in the classroom. Articles appearing in some teacher journals admonished teachers to give high priority to child adjustment problems and to the "redirection" of personality, rather than to merely cognitive matters or to the development of purely intellectual skills. It seemed to be assumed that desirable personality changes would be forthcoming if only the teacher would learn to limit his concern with the child's academic achievement and mastery of subject matter, so as to make room for the attempt to effect such personality changes -- changes which a trained psychiatrist might hesitate to expect after lengthy private analysis and treatment. Be that as it may, I shall say no more on this subject, turning instead to comment on the matter of the apparent conflict between the practical and the theoretical, as it sometimes seems to be popularly conceived.

Whatever unfriendly feelings some practitioners and theoreticians may have for each other, direct conflict between theory and practice is a myth. Nothing is "true" in theory and "false" in practice, or vice versa: however coherent and free from self-contradiction, no theory is adequate which fails to account for what happens in practice; and what happens in practice, unless it somehow is theoretically explained, understood, or fitted into a larger context, remains a factual mystery. Dewey is right in insisting that the final test of any theory is whether it "works" in the sense that its implications and predictions are consistent with events. But completely unexplained events, completely unaccounted-for facts, or what might be called completely raw data must be as meaningless to a man as to a rabbit -- without the context of theory, they are at best things processed by the senses, not grasped.
by the mind. This means that theory is the intellectual twin of practice, not its
opponent; its verbal description and explanation, not something separate or wholly
other. The prized "common sense" of the anti-theoretical man is nothing but theory
-- perhaps informal theory, unsophisticated theory, imprecisely stated theory, or
even untested theory, but theory none the less. Its validity, as with all theory, de-
PENDS UPON WHAT PRACTICAL EVENTS MAY DETERMINE; TO ACCEPT COMMON SENSE AND TO
deny theory in this way of looking at it is to contradict itself.

Anyone familiar with Dewey, or perhaps even with William James, will find
nothing very new in this account of the relationship between theory and practice.
But having affirmed my agreement with the analysis, I would add one final word of
cautiON. If the so-called practical man is wrong in being unduly suspicious of theory,
the consequence of which may lead him to an uncritical acceptance of ideas whose
rational credentials may be lacking, I think he may not be entirely wrong if he
entertains some practical doubts as to the universal application of reason itself -- at
least in the sense that there are limits to the uses of logical, scientific, or philoso-
phical analysis. Logicians and philosophers may sigh that the world is not more ra-
tional, and we may well sigh with them, but it is not at all clear that we have a right
to expect reason to be equally apt and equally indispensable in our dealings with
all the matters which claim our attention. For example, in a certain crucial sense,
reason has very little to do directly with two of man's chief preoccupations, love
and arts, as I believe anyone would attest who ever has been seriously involved in the
making of either. No doubt Plato enjoyed analyzing love as a Form and writing
about it in the Symposium, and those of us who are members of the American
Society for Aesthetics I am sure enjoy doing the philosophy of art and benefit both
intellecTually and aesthetically -- but no one should think that analyzing an emotion
really is exactly the same as having it, or that understanding or even appreciating a
work of art really is exactly the same as creating or making one. Man possesses
many capacities in addition to his capacity to reason; he makes his world in addi-
tion to discovering it; in a word, man is a complex being whose nature does not
yield too readily to scientific or philosophical analysis, and it surely is unwise to
pretend to know everything about him. One is safe from error, of course, in general-
zizing at a certain remote level of abstraction. Aristotle thought man a political
animal; Chomsky thinks him a linguistic one; both of course are right: men prove it
when they are cheaters and liars and heroes and poets. However sympathetic to
reason and however intellectualized we become, we cannot escape from the possi-
ibility that reason may not be everything, and that sometimes, if only rarely, a man
even may think too much before he acts. If it is true that on occassion we behave
like fools, it also is true that on occassion we become aware of it; whenever we do,
the important thing first is to stop, and only then to take the time to work out the
reasons why.

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Some of the problems plaguing higher education in the United States are
largely material in nature, while others seem more philosophical, although it is clear
that they often are related to each other. The former include some of the most seri-
sous, such as the problem of gaining adequate financial support for educational
institutions, the problem of generating sufficient enrollment of the sort most likely
to profit from the experience, the problem of providing adequate research facilities
and research opportunities for faculty and graduate students so that reasonable
progress in the disciplines may be furthered, and so on. Of these I shall say little,
except as they may relate directly to those issues of institutional direction and purpose which are associated with certain more philosophical problems.

There are two problems of philosophical interest, often mentioned separately, which I believe to be connected: (1) the apparent trend toward specialization in higher education at the undergraduate level, sometimes referred to as vocationalism or the job-oriented professionalization of the curriculum, and the conflict of this trend with more traditional concepts of the importance of undergraduate liberal arts curricula; and (2) the trend toward egalitarianism and away from exclusivity, both in the make-up of the student body, and in the nature of the curriculum at the undergraduate level.

With regard to the first issue, it is regretted by some that what they take to be the original purpose of undergraduate education, i.e., the providing of an education in the liberal arts, is being crowded out by a new and increasingly pervasive student tendency to judge the relevance of all undergraduate study in terms of job preparation. As one who shares the belief that the liberal arts are of major value to the purposes of higher education, I think a number of comments may be made. First, it cannot be doubted that many if not most students are deeply concerned with future employment, and such concern indeed may be on the rise, but it is historically incorrect to assume that higher education in the United States, in the main, ever was indifferent to career preparation, both as one of its major functions and as one of its chief justifications for existence. As we all know, it was the sober recognition of the need to produce Puritan ministers that moved the General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1636 to provide a grant establishing the first enduring institution of higher education in the British colonies in America. During the eighteenth century, as its religious attachment to Congregationalism declined, Harvard grew to be a first-rate institution of general studies at the undergraduate level, but by then it had established graduate schools of divinity, law, and medicine. The general undergraduate liberal arts college long has served as a kind of prep-school for the professional school or college, whose programs at the graduate level have tended to influence if not dominate undergraduate curricula. No doubt there has always been some resentment of this influence by those undergraduate professors who think their work to be essential in preparing for any profession, or think of it as producing the cultural awareness and intellectual development of the student which has an importance equal to or greater than that of career preparation. This is not to say that the sciences, arts, and humanities, even as taught at the undergraduate level, cannot also be thought of as professional studies. There are careers to be had in the performing arts, and there are the honored professions of journalist, writer, historian, artist, and practicing scientist, all of which normally require a liberal arts undergraduate education of a sort, however specialized or segregated portions of that education may become under the influence of the organized professions and the graduate schools which increasingly have provided entrance to them. In addition, there always is the need to prepare a new generation of college teachers, which would seem to provide vocational justification for undergraduate instruction in every existing liberal arts area, including even philosophy, a discipline which provides its practitioners no other obvious way to be included among the ranks of the gainfully employed. Perhaps those of us who serve or have served in philosophy departments have been made particularly sensitive to the apparent increase in vocationalism: it is a commonplace to note that many questions once called philosophical have coalesced to become the separate sciences, leaving philosophy in possession of what long has been a steadily shrinking field of inquiry. As university budgets and student enrollments decline, some of us are beginning to
fear that philosophy departments still are considered to be *de rigueur* in colleges of arts and sciences only in the sense that crossed swords are accepted as appropriately placed over the mantelpiece: their continuing presence is sanctioned as a sort of decorative reminder of our colorful past, but no one wishes to think of circumstances which might restore them to their original importance.

As demands for vocationalized curricula increase, other academic departments have begun to be concerned -- not only as to their potential existence, but as to the effect of such changes on the quality of higher education in the long term. That faculty members are concerned with their professional welfare certainly is hardly surprising; that they have been unwilling or unable to unite effectively in support of a broad liberal arts education as the kind of education required (and perhaps even deserved) by every intelligent student is less easy to understand. If too many students have come to think of higher education only as a way to further their own private vocational prospects, it may be in part because too many professors think of higher education in exactly the same way. The defense of the liberal arts curriculum seems to have been left to professors who have become so narrowly specialized -- perhaps in response to academic and professional competition -- that they have come to consider the study of their own discipline to be obviously essential, and the study of everyone else's discipline to be obviously optional. To the extent that this attitude of curricular narcissism cannot be overcome, the preservation of the values of the liberal arts remains in doubt.

It is, of course, somewhat understandable that a professor may mistake his enthusiasm for his own discipline as evidence for the universality of its importance, but students surely should know better. In making his judgments about what is important in his program, any student who becomes routinely impatient with any part of his course of study which fails to meet his private tests of vocational relevance is in danger of mistaking what may be to his ultimate advantage. To stop too often to ask "Is this likely to be of any practical use?" or "Am I really enjoying this?" is to make the likeliest answer to both questions "No." To be solely concerned with advancing one's perceived interests is to make such advancement uncertain, not because Providence punishes the self-concerned, but because none of us -- not even the young -- can ever be completely and absolutely certain as to where our best interests lie, or that our judgments are unfailingly sound. If we refuse to recognize this, we refuse to recognize that there may be something important yet to be learned, and we abandon the role of scholar for that of swami. In a student such an attitude, though certainly intellectually unhealthy, may not be incurable if there still is time to expose him to some excellent teaching, and if he still is able to profit from it; in a professor on the other hand, it sometimes turns out to be intellectually fatal.

I do not mean to imply that students should accept the opinions of others as to what is good for them without submitting such opinions to rigorous examination and review, nor that they should in any way quit the responsibility of thinking things through for themselves. I mean only that all of us must be willing to submit our own ideas to the same critical analysis to which we subject the ideas of others -- and then do our best to retain a degree of reasonable doubt as to the validity of our conclusions. For most of us, this virtue is easier to acknowledge than it is to practice, as Socrates so often is allowed to show us in Plato's dialogues, but it remains *sine qua non* of achieving a point of view worth having.

What bothers some observers of the trend toward vocationalism in higher education is not so much the vocational attitudes of undergraduates, nor even the historic, if increasing, influence that graduate schools and professional organiza-
tions bring to bear on undergraduate liberal arts programs, but rather the introduction of new curricula designed to prepare students for entrance into vocations not usually thought of as requiring a college education at all -- especially, perhaps, a college education in which the study of the liberal arts is thought to be of central importance. In their drive for students, some colleges have broadened their offerings to include so-called academic majors of a new and surprising character, presumably on grounds that the liberal arts may have a contribution to make, both to the student and to the field or vocation. It sometimes is argued that for anyone to insist otherwise is to reveal himself to be an academic snob or a narrow-minded traditionalist of the most inflexible kind. On this issue I believe it to be important for those who value the study of the liberal arts to take a firm stand. It is essential that higher education survive its current difficulties, but it also is essential not to destroy the ultimate justification of its survival by the very methods we employ to achieve it. The problem, of course, is really not one of snobbery nor of defending an outdated tradition: it is one of preserving whatever may be left of the integrity of the educational experience. Some colleges have announced vocational programs in fish-and-game management and automobile repair and maintenance, which would seem to have a less-than-obvious symbiotic relationship with the liberal arts. Perhaps the crucial test of whether a particular vocational program should be included within the offerings of a college of arts and sciences, is the degree to which intellectual benefits in particular, or other benefits not of a purely vocational nature, might accrue to students who elect to study aspects of the program, but who have no intention of choosing the vocation as a career. There would always be serious differences of opinion on such matters, of course, but at least the resulting quarrels would reflect attempts to preserve some reasonable standard of intellectual quality in programs of higher education, and they surely are preferable to the tacit agreement that there are no standards to preserve, or that literally anything should count as higher education so long as some students are willing to pay to study it. In dealing with issues of this kind, it is, I believe, equally as wrong to equate intellectualism with being broadminded; our concerns should focus, not on labels, but on issues and their consequences.

The consequences for the integrity of higher education, when financial pressures become great, perhaps may be illustrated by what has happened at some colleges and universities to what used to be thought of as the amateur athletic program. It obviously has become extremely profitable for universities to maintain successful athletic teams, so that television coverage and gate receipts may support other university programs, and so that the favorable publicity gained may encourage favorable consideration by potential students and potential donors. Preserving the public's faith in the amateur nature of the proceedings has been something of a problem from time to time, and many institutions have shown considerable creativity in dealing with it. At some universities, courses such as "The Philosophy of Basketball" now must be attempted by students seeking to meet the academic requirements of a major in Sports Science. Unfortunately, not all institutions seem to hold unfailingly high standards of academic achievement: on occasion, student-athletes have been credited on the record with courses not taken, and off the record with illegal payments which were, while busy establishing a record for athletic prowess impressive enough to ensure eventual employment as professional football players or basketball players, against the day when their current desire for scholarly attainment may have begun to lose some of its urgency. This thirst for knowledge of the potential professional athlete has been duly acknowledged by the vast majority of American universities, who have found it appropriate to rein-
vest in their athletic programs by providing a remarkable number of "athletic scholarships," thus ensuring a continuing reputation for successful athletic performance. So general has this acknowledgement become that it has been found necessary to regulate it by establishing limits, so that no single institution may seem to enjoy a special advantage. As a result, the maximum number of such grants permitted has become the number made available, thus leading to occasional abuses, so that even at an institution with the standards of morality and traditions of scholarship of Notre Dame University, the likelihood in a given year that the members of the football squad will turn out to be genuine scholar-athletes may not be substantially greater than the likelihood that they will turn out to be Irish.

The proliferation of vocational programs may be considered as connected with, and in certain ways as reflecting, the trend toward egalitarianism, both as to the nature of the curriculum and the nature of the student body. With regard to the latter, there now is a major difference of opinion as to whether almost anyone ought to be permitted to try higher education, or whether certain minimum standards for admission and continuing participation should be enforced. Even those who agree on the traditional principle of exclusivity seldom seem to agree on what minimum qualifications for admission should be established, or how they should be measured.

One such qualification -- perhaps the one most frequently mentioned -- is appropriate student command of language and facility with oral and written expression. This qualification often is used to illustrate what may be the most common argument for the principle of exclusivity: the claim that bad scholarship drives out good. It is argued that too many would-be college freshman arrive on campus as functional illiterates; insofar as the demands of higher education are concerned, unable to command language with sufficient expertise to deal successfully with the complex ideas and concepts which are an essential part of higher education, and with which students must deal if the experience is not to become a sham. It sometimes is further argued that if considerable numbers of such students are allowed to remain, in the hope that the experience somehow may turn out to be of value for them, the classes they attend inevitably will be adversely affected. Teachers may attempt to explain complex ideas by over-simplifying them or by otherwise misrepresenting them, or, in desperation, may just decide to leave many of them out. This denies normal access to the important concepts by the more qualified students in attendance, and has the even more serious consequence of lowering the levels of expectation of both faculty and student, so that the ultimate character of the institution is shaped, not by the excellence of its faculty and student scholars, but by the lowest intellectual common denominator of scholarly ability present in the student body.

In reply to these serious charges, the suggestion sometimes is made that the institution of higher education has the obligation to deal with students at whatever level of competency it finds them, and to learn to do it efficiently. There is an argument to the effect that, if a lack of a precise command of language inhibits logical thought, gaining a precise command of language should enable one to think logically. Unfortunately, this turns out to be too optimistic if the command of language represents only a necessary but not a sufficient condition for logical thought. Whatever remedies may be attempted at particular institutions, it seems too unrealistic to expect that long-established habits of verbal incompetency and imprecision of thought and expression can easily be erased by providing the student with a semester or two of remedial English -- a hoped-for miracle which generates considerable skepticism even among -- or perhaps especially among -- professors of English. Giving
someone a grammatical command of his language surely is no guarantee that he ever will write or say anything worth reading or hearing, but if someone ever is capable of making essential distinctions or of doing reasonably precise thinking, he and we shall discover it only if he can express it to himself and to us in something other than the winks, twitches, and groans of the truly illiterate, or the uncritically-adopted generalities, slang-cliches, and grammatical contradictions of the semiliterate. Society has the right to defend itself from the tyranny of the ignorant, and in higher education, at least, I believe it is time we stopped accepting this form of intellectual incompetency as a legitimate variation on the theme of freedom of speech.

Locke's warning that much of what purports to be education fits us rather for the university than the world, today might be rephrased to say that much of what purports to be education fits us for neither. In higher education there is a crisis of confidence as to what is important and what is not, and many of the important decisions which will be made seem beyond our influence and control. In producing the professional, we may have begun to lose sight of the importance of producing the amateur, and those values most often associated with educational purposes that are essentially non-vocational. To fit someone for a successful career and a useful life certainly is important, but it is not everything, and I believe the ultimate worth of a culture and the transcendent merits of a society eventually must be judged by what else is taken to be important. The study of the liberal arts should need no further justification than that it truly represents the study of the best creative achievements of mankind.

The study of philosophy, when most effective, creates in the student three habits of mind: the habit of being clear as to what he believes, the habit of asking himself why he believes it, and the habit of being suspicious of answers too easy, comfortable, or vague. The study of the sciences brings the student to confront the reality of evidence, and makes him familiar with the values to be gained in matching theories of description and explanation with their proper tests. Students discover that history, literature, and the arts have their own intrinsic delights, and they come to realize that these creative acts are more than the decorations of the cultural record or the valued possessions of the educated mind, whenever they light a candle to our imperfections or let us glimpse the possibilities of human excellence.
Some Reflections on the Philosophy of Education

NOTES


2. Ibid., p.5.


