

EDUCATION UNDER ETHICAL CHAOS

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EDUCATIONAL and pedagogical questions are always with us, but in late years these questions have been discussed with rather exceptional earnestness and concern. Literally every part and aspect of our educational system have been challenged. Some of our ablest and most faithful educators have all but despaired of that system. Schools and colleges, it has been said in sorrow and in anger, do more harm than good. They are standardized, conventional, wedded to certain outworn ideals, controlled by ignorant, stupid or selfish and reactionary members of the Plutocracy, and they stifle inquiry, destroy independence, cripple originality and darken counsel by sophistry, suppression, misrepresentation, what not.

It is unnecessary to continue the summary of the indictment. Intelligent persons are familiar with it. Here we shall consider certain issues that have emerged from the agitated and poignant discussion of educational faults, vices, omissions, and high misdemeanors.

The first and most vital is this: In an age universally described as transitional, an age of intellectual and moral confusion, lack of positive standards, profound skepticism and "reevaluation of all values," what are the professors and teachers to teach? Dr. Alexander Miklejohn, head of the late Experimental College of the University of Wisconsin, has often dramatized and emphasized this question. *How* to teach, he has said truly, *when* to teach this or that subject, how to coordinate and organize education are relatively minor questions, to be answered in the light of the basic question—*What?*

The more intelligent and sincere an educator is, the less competent he is—and feels himself to be—to guide and direct youth or, for that matter, adult persons in search of culture and knowledge. In religion, Agnosticism has taken the place of Belief. In ethics, thanks to anthropology, history, modern geography, ethnology, and other sciences, dogmatism is no longer possible or respectable.

^Ve do not know what the future will do for the family, the institution of marriage, the political organism, the economic system,

the form and modes of social organization. We do know that everything is changing and evolving, and that no principle can be said to be absolute.

It would be foolish to deny, therefore, that the position of the educator is much more difficult today than it was in the simpler days of absolutism in theology, religion and ethics. But it is less difficult than it is generally represented to be. The lay world appreciates—in a vague way, to be sure—the nature of the educators' predicament and does not expect more of them than they can honestly and legitimately give.

Let me illustrate. Some years ago the University of Wisconsin was under attack from several powerful quarters, including the legislature and governor of the state, because of its alleged social and political radicalism. It was charged that too many of its professors were socialists and were actually teaching socialism, indirectly perhaps, and undermining the American economic and political system by their heresies. It was charged, further, that many of the professors were "godless" and adherents of the mechanistic philosophy of the universe.

The present writer was asked by a leading daily newspaper to interview the Governor of Wisconsin, a few legislators and some of the professors and deans of the University at Madison. He gladly accepted the mission and discharged it with scrupulous impartiality. And what did he find? That the assaults upon the University were attributable to a grave misunderstanding—to failure to distinguish between "teaching" and honest *exposition*. When he called the attention of the Governor to that significant distinction the latter—who had not thought of it—instantly admitted that it would be wrong and inexpedient for any first-class educational institution to ignore socialist theory and socialist movements. He would not, he declared earnestly, object to full and frank exposition of socialism at the University; he objected only to the teaching of socialism in the sense of professorial approval and indorsement of socialism, Marxian or other, and the sweeping condemnation of the present system based, as he thought, upon private property, free contract, competition, and reward of capital as well as of labor and management.

The University authorities then were seen and interrogated. They solemnly assured me that socialism and radical theories gen-

erally were *not* being taught at the institution, but only expounded and elucidated. And this, moreover, without overemphasis and with full recognition of the case for the present system or alternative systems embodying individualistic principles.

Clearly, there was no real issue between the University and its vehement critics. The bitter controversy did not long survive the confusion of thought which gave it birth. Indeed, the recent demagogical attempt to revive that controversy met with complete failure.

Now, have we not in this one example the key to the solution of practically all our educational problems? No educator should be required or permitted to teach what he does not believe, but he should be permitted and encouraged to give his students the benefits of his knowledge and lay before them, objectively, the various theories and conceptions that are worthy of attention and discussion in his particular field.

Today, for instance, no professor of economics can overlook the Russian Soviet-Communist experiment. We must and ought to discuss it, analyze it, explain the ideas that underlie it, present the arguments pro and con the experiment, and let the students reach their own conclusions. No sane defender of Capitalism or Individualism can object to such treatment of a momentous revolution.

What is true of economics, politics, government is equally true of religion, morals, art, philosophy. No educational institution should dogmatize where the scientific spirit and attitude forbid dogmatizing. Open questions should be discussed as such, and whether or not a question is open, is a point not at all hard to determine.

Are not all sound educators insisting that their business is not to impose opinions upon students, but to teach them to think for themselves—to compare, test, weigh, and verify before forming any opinion? If this be true, as it is, what is the corollary? Why, manifestly this—that the personal views or leanings of a teacher or professor are not of great consequence, provided he is well informed and willing to be fair and impartial in his exposition of divergent and conflicting theories.

One professor's conservatism should no more constitute a qualification, or disqualification, than another's liberalism or radicalism. What should be demanded of all would-be teachers is ability to teach, to open minds, to stimulate independent thinking and the desire to understand and to know.

It will be objected, perhaps, that the position here taken is applicable only to colleges, post-graduate schools, professional schools, but not to primary and secondary schools. There is some force in the objection, but not much. The primary and secondary schools do not deal, and should not deal, with highly controversial subjects. They cannot wholly ignore such subjects, but even in elementary text-books on economics, politics, government, history, and the like, it is possible to indicate differences of opinion while dwelling on the need of further and deeper study. Besides, the primary and secondary schools will have their hands full if they attend to the elements of the more exact sciences—geography, physics, mathematics, physiology, hygiene, grammar, languages, music, drawing.

Educators, indeed, have complained that the colleges unduly dominate and tyrannize over the primary and secondary schools. The majority of children, it is pointed out, discontinue their academic education when they graduate from the primary school. They should, therefore, be prepared not for college, but for life—for work and for citizenship.

Quite true, but how is one prepared for work and citizenship, or for life in modern society? Certainly not by suppression or distortion of facts, or by ignoring serious problems, or by indulging in misty generalities and deliberately refraining from applying first principles to typical situations and patent maladjustments. Education must be scientific, not contrary to science, but there is no conflict between science and the truly practical viewpoint. Nothing is sillier than the talk of some successful men of business about the danger of theorizing in blissful ignorance of practical, daily experience. Theories not based on experience are worthless. The true man of science builds his theories upon facts and corrects them in the light of additional facts. The objection is not to theory, but to false, loose, jumped-at theories.

One of the great services rendered by the Hoover Committee on Social Trends was to emphasize our social, ethical and cultural lag—the backwardness of our social and economic institutions as compared with the marvellous progress of technology and the exact sciences. Now, this backwardness, or lag, is not due to confusion, to lack of agreement among the natural leaders, but to the selfishness, stubbornness, fear, inertia, and wilful obscurantism of certain

vested interests. We have not encouraged social invention, or the readjustments demanded by changes in the conditions of life and work. The leaders have not been permitted to lead. Legislation has often spurned scientific advice. Moral standards have been flouted and violated by politicians and statesmen. And have the educators and thinkers boldly asserted their intellectual and moral authority? They have not. They have emphasized, not points of agreement, but points of disagreement.

In this tragic failure of the "clerks"—as Mr. Julien Benda might say—we should find the moral insisted upon in this paper—namely, that the things we *do* know, if we honestly applied them to life, would renovate, transform and transfigure modern society to an extent and degree that would make all talk of upheaval and revolution simply ridiculous and silly. Our excuse is that we are unsettled, confused, palsied. But this is not true.

Let me revert to a very practical question—the teaching of religious truth. Must we boycott religion because few educated men now entertain any belief in the divinity of Jesus, the existence of a personal God, human salvation by grace, bodily resurrection and the like? Certainly not. The duty and right of the professors of religion are as important as ever, though different from those of the days of dogma and fundamentalism. Students are interested in religion, religious history, religious controversy. The professors can and should trace for them the evolution and decline of the great religions of the world. They can discuss, impartially, the similarities and dissimilarities, between these religions. They can discuss the sectarian divisions within them.

The student thus guided and instructed would either embrace one of the great religions still professed and superficially dominant or else reject them all and adopt the Agnostic position. To such freedom of choice he is entitled, and education in the true sense of the term recognizes that right and serves it.

What is true of religion is true of philosophy and of ethics. Education may or may not lead to a definite choice, but the student should know and understand the several philosophical systems competing for his allegiance—Idealism, Realism, Neo-Idealism, Critical Realism, Pragmatism, Monism, Dualism, and so forth. He should know, likewise, the essence of Hebrew ethics, Greek ethics, Christian ethics, utilitarian ethics, evolutionary ethics, Nietzsche-Stirner-Egoist ethics.

Need I multiply illustrations? The point seems to be clear and irrefutable. The perplexity of so many contemporary educators seems to me to be, largely, the result of confusion of thought. H. G. Wells put the case in a nutshell when he said that the child, or adolescent, or adult student, must, first and last, learn what sort of world he lives in, what his place is in that world, what its history is, and what is its relation to the Universe as a whole. We hear a good deal about optional courses, about individual initiative in education, but the truth is overlooked that some knowledge is essential to all of us, and that without it we are tragically ignorant, helpless, stupid, and unadjusted to life.

We may or may not choose to learn Latin, Greek, Hebrew, but no one can live intelligently without knowledge of his own language, or mother-tongue, and at least one other major language—German, French, or Spanish. No pupil or student should be allowed to “cut” geography, history, mathematics, elementary physiology, physics and astronomy.

What education needs is not so much novelty, originality, as sound sense and method. The subjects or courses are imposed by necessity, and their proper classification presents no particular difficulty. But what *is* taught should be taught well, and with enthusiasm and love. No subject is dull if presented with knowledge, interest, and force. As a rule, the failure of an educational institution, or department, is the failure of its faculty—the teachers and instructors.

At a convention of Law School deans and professors some time ago, the startling statement was made that references or allusions to Shakespeare, or Dickens, or the classical authors of Europe, ancient or modern, are meaningless and unintelligible to at least half of the average class in a law school. Now, no law school today admits students who have not had a high-school education plus the equivalent of two-years' training in an accredited college. Where does the blame lie if young men and women of twenty or over, supposed to be ready for a law school, are ignorant of letters? What have these students done in school and college; what have they studied and learned, and why was literature left out of their curricula? How, in truth, can one teach reading and literature, literary history, composition, style, without constant reference to classical and modern novelists, playwrights, poets and essayists?

The indictment against the law-school students was in reality an indictment of the teachers and professors who had charge, for years, of impressionable and eager boys and girls. Perhaps society does not pay salaries sufficient to attract to teaching able, earnest, conscientious men and women. But the teacher who thinks only of his pay is a poor teacher indeed. The teacher is worthy of his hire, and society should not exploit him, but the better part of the teacher's compensation is moral and spiritual. A great Harvard professor said in an article in *The Atlantic Monthly* that he had been paid all his life for doing something which he would gladly have paid the University for letting him do—direct, inspire, and train Youth. Many teachers have the same feeling and attitude, no doubt, but not all. More's the pity.

It is my conviction that the trustees of our universities and colleges, and the lawmakers, state and local, who control the public school systems, would evince more actual respect for the principle of freedom of teaching—a principle no one ventures openly to oppose—if the professors and teachers, instead of substituting new dogmas for old, dubious theories for dubious traditions, evinced due appreciation of their own duty and function. The true spirit of science is tolerant, and our age, because of its transitional character, demands tolerance and open-mindedness of all. The only thing that cannot and must not be tolerated is the invasion by spoils, politics, and jobbery. For all other evils complained of by educators and others the remedy is the scientific approach. This approach does not admit of injustice to any school of thought and insures a hearing for all. Neither does it preclude reasonable discipline, proper conditions of teaching and learning, and a measure of tactful, positive guidance of the pupils and students.

The foregoing observations adequately account for my entire indifference to the liquidation of the Experimental College of the University of Wisconsin. That college may have proved something, but it has given rise to more confusion and misapprehension than to anything else. It ignored all vital contemporary problems and directed its students to investigate Greek civilization or some phases of Medievalism. These matters, the theory was, could be treated without bias, whereas contemporary questions were too "burning"

too contentious to be studied objectively or courageously. But, as I have argued, this view is totally unsound. No question is dangerous, even to politicians and rural Tories, if discussed frankly from every point of view. Capitalism, for example, can be analyzed and dissected without offending the staunchest defenders of that system. Give all the arguments for it and against it, cite the best authorities, advise further study, and tell the student that in the end he will have to reach his own conclusions. Who would attack this method? And is it not truly illuminating and scientific? I assert confidently that it is.