

PROBLEM OF THE ARTS COURSE*

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A FAMOUS resolution once brought before the English House of Commons was to the effect that the influence of the Crown had increased, was increasing and ought to be diminished. At the present day almost any person acquainted with our universities would admit that the importance of the Arts course had diminished, was diminishing and ought to be increased. The question is, can anything be done about it?

There was a time not so very long ago when the course was the very centre and crown of higher education. Its position was unassailed and apparently unassailable. To all intents and purposes it *was* the university, and an arts degree was a necessary proof that one had a liberal education.

That time has passed. The Arts course has fallen from its high estate. Only too often it has become simply a continuation of high school, a necessary (because required by the authorities) but fortunately not a very difficult interlude before the young man enters on the real object of his university education. Having wasted several years on English and football, he buckles down to become a lawyer or a doctor or a dentist or a scientist. The Arts course has been stultified by being made a door mat that all must cross (or partly cross) before entering on a professional career.

To make the situation still more clear the student is offered a degree at a bargain. In order to induce him to take a little more arts he is allowed to offer part of his professional course in part payment for an arts degree. He finally receives a B.A. without having any more appreciation of what its real meaning should be than when he entered the university as a freshman. It is indeed hard to think of any arrangement better designed to lower the prestige of any course. It is not only easy, but it is apparently of such an uncertain nature that almost anything can be stuck in the parcel and have the Bachelor of Arts degree attached.

After the professional student has departed to take up a really serious study, where there is a definite content and an avowed end, what have we left in arts? Mainly young men and young women who intend to be teachers. They are just as much professional students as those who took arts classes because they were necessary before they could enter on the study

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of medicine or law or science or dentistry. For them too Arts is but a means to an end. Their course and their selection of classes is determined by a strictly utilitarian motive. They must take them because they desire to teach.

To sum up, in the eyes of a great many college students the arts course is either a necessary preparation for those who intend to enter on a professional career, or else it is a course for those who intend to be teachers. It is often a pleasant course, sometimes interesting, seldom hard. For most of them, however, it has no clear, definite purpose of its own. The Arts course is finished when the Registrar is satisfied. That is all.

The first question that one is bound to ask is whether the Arts course has any definite purpose, and if it has what that purpose is. Has the Arts faculty in our modern university any real fundamental aim? Does it seek to do something, does it know what that something is, does it know how to do it, and does it know when it has been done? Or do our Arts faculties live in such a haze that they do not know what their purpose is, or if they do, do not know how to achieve it, or know when they have done it. In lieu of any definite philosophy they talk about a vague thing called culture, and in despair of measuring it they accept so many classes, or points, or credits, or whatever unit of measurement their latest efficiency expert has got inserted in the calendar. If the prayer wheel is turned the right number of times, no further questions are asked.

Here the discussion often becomes one on the question as to what subjects ought to be taught and for how long. Must the study of English be compulsory? How much time ought to be spent on foreign languages, ought a knowledge of mathematics and science and history and philosophy be required from every student? This whole question I wish to avoid, at least for the present. I do not see that we are in any position to give an answer until we know what the purpose of the Arts course is. Until we are clear in our own minds as to what we are trying to do, I do not see that there is any possible answer as to how we are going to do it.

Two things I am certain that the Arts course is not. In the first place it is not intended—at least not primarily—to give information. Its purpose is not to turn out well informed students—students who can shine in information tests. Students can be remarkably well informed on all kinds of subjects—even so-called cultural subjects—and still fail to obtain what the Arts course ought to give.

In the second place the Arts course is not intended to develop special skills and techniques. Its critics may say that it is not practical. That is not a criticism; that is of the very nature of the Arts course. To take the most obvious example, it is not intended to develop school teachers.

What, then, is the purpose of the Arts course? To my mind the answer is clear. The Arts faculty in all our universities is the custodian, the guardian of the accumulated wisdom of mankind. It is probably impossible to say just what subjects ought or ought not to be included in the Arts curriculum, but the purpose aimed at ought never to be obscure. It is to make the student aware of, and so far as possible familiar with, the highest intellectual achievements of the human race. It is to make him a lover of knowledge and of beauty. It is to introduce him to a great company of the wisest and the best and to give him the opportunity of joining that company if he is worthy. It is a training of the spirit as well as of the mind. It ought to raise him above the trivial and the ephemeral and give him a vision of the universe *sub specie aeternitatis*. It ought to make him say, "Once I was blind but now I can see." No longer is he tossed about on the sea of opinion, no longer is he misled by force or by success. Truth for him has become a reality, and by her judgments is he led.

It was some such belief that drew students to sit at the feet of Plato in the fourth century before Christ, and to pursue Abelard some fifteen centuries later. It was not information that they were after or training in some skill or technique. They were seeking an answer to the old question, "Where shall wisdom be found and where is the place of understanding?" It is a growing scepticism as to whether our Arts faculties offer it to-day that is at the basis of much of our trouble. Science and the gods of science have undermined Arts. We wander in strange paths and follow after false gods.

Many an Arts graduate is an able mathematician, or he can tell you much about physics or chemistry or biology, or he can talk very learnedly about the B.N.A. Act or the American constitution, or he may be a philologist of parts or babble the latest news about sociology or the Canadian Banking System, or he may be a research student well on his way to the elusive Ph.D.; yet each and all of them have failed to receive the liberal education that the Arts course ought to give. They have accumulated much information, they have become technically efficient in some subject, but they are all of them, in the words

of Matthew Arnold, Philistines. We produce thousands of them in our Arts colleges every year, but in a very profound sense every one of them marks a failure in our system.

We fail, but that is not the real tragedy. The real tragedy is that often we do not know that we fail; or if we are conscious of our misfortune we have lost all hope of remedying it.

What can we do about it? The first and most obvious thing is to recognize what the Arts course is, and never forget that object for one moment. Every part of the course ought to be part of an intelligent plan aimed at achieving an intelligent end. There ought to be no loose, disconnected, or unnecessary parts. The whole ought to be as simple and as interrelated and as efficient as a first class watch.

The extent to which this is true differs in different universities. In only too many cases, however, the students' course seems to be constructed to fulfil the requirement of the calendar or the time table or the students' indolence. The test of the courses is not whether it is going to make the student wise or not; the question is, does the course fulfil all the requirements for the degree. If it does that it is sufficient. Who would be so unreasonable to require anything more?

A second problem that has to be faced is to simplify and purify the Arts course. Along with the free elective system was introduced the idea that all subjects were free and equal. No longer were classics and mathematics to hold the field. The University curriculum must include all knowledge. Any subject was worthy of a student's attention. The specious argument was advanced that the only qualitative difference was the difference in the way that the subject was studied. As much value was gained from the study of the most profound problem or of the most trivial. It all depended on method. It made no difference whether you were observing the universe with Plato or whether you were observing the actions of a rat deprived of food for two days. Plato and the rat were equally good guides.

Not only did subjects multiply, but the courses grew like mushrooms. The professor's interests or his researches or his fads had free play. Was it not all part of the great field of knowledge?

Once the student travelled a broad, well paved, much travelled highway through the forest. Now he treads his way through the jungle along a maze of bypaths. There are advantages—of a sort. Difficulties can be avoided; subjects can be

studied without any previous training or preparation. Graduates are turned out with minds quite lacking in discipline, who have never grappled with a real intellectual problem, who are often unable to recognize one even when it is before them, who have not the slightest glimmer of interest or of understanding of the great philosophical dilemmas that surround mankind on every side. They go to add to the mob of educated illiterates who already do so much to discredit the Arts degree.

Perhaps it is the anarchy in the Arts curriculum, the disappearance of standards and of purpose, that has allowed another abuse to develop. That is the abuse of counting for the Arts degree work that ought to have been done before the student entered the university. This is particularly true in the study of foreign languages. The actual mastery of the instrument is not part of an Arts course. What we do with the instrument is the essential thing. The same criticism applies in many other fields. The Arts course is not the place to lay the foundations. That should be done elsewhere.

Using the word in the broadest sense, the very core of the Arts course should be philosophy. Probably the subject itself should be a required part of the course, but in any case every subject ought to be studied philosophically. The aim ought to be to make the student see life steadily and see it whole. He ought to be made not only conscious of his own ignorance but of how little even the wisest man knows. If he realized, as he ought to realize, that the answers of the wisest men have been but questions, we would be saved from the coxsureness that has always been the mark of the half-educated. The world cries out for wisdom; never did it need it more than it does now; in the Arts course we ought at least to try to supply the demand.

Every Arts graduate should be familiar with the great literary masterpieces of the world. Certainly no man should be a Bachelor of Arts who is ignorant of those written in his own tongue. History must be taught, but only by men who believe that wisdom comes from the study. It ought to be an uplifting and ennobling experience, not an arid waste where facts are pursued for their own sake and the discipline of research is the only reward. Above all things the Arts course should be the place where the student thinks over again the great thoughts of mankind.

From its very nature an Arts course must be an end in itself. Being dedicated to the highest, it cannot stoop to the lower.

You cannot serve God and Mammon. To do anything else is a deceit and a lie. Wisdom is justified of her children.

Motives are of fundamental importance. Is the purpose of the study the noble one of seeking truth or the ignoble one of seeking lucre? If the aim of the study of mathematics is to enlarge a man's mind and admit him to the heavenly city where true mathematicians dwell, it is a worthy subject for the Arts degree. If its purpose is the ignoble one of collecting an Arts degree while preparing for a course in accounting or in engineering, it is not serving its purpose and should not be on that man's Arts course. It may be only a difference in spirit, but it is the difference between day and night, between light and darkness.

The same considerations apply in regard to a great many subjects that fill up our Arts courses under the name of the social sciences. So far as they open a student's eyes to the great problems of human society well and good. No person would ever object to the study of Aristotle or Plato or of Machiavelli or of Hobbes or of Locke or of Rousseau or Ricardo or of Karl Marx. They are a challenge to a student's mind and thought. What we should object to is the great lists of classes in government and sociology and political science that are nothing but descriptive classes. The chief purpose of a great number of these classes is simply to fill the student's mind with information about how we are governed, how our banking system works, problems of social security, old age pensions or what not. They lay no particular tax on the mind of the student and are quite outside the range of study that should comprise the Arts course. They are information classes, and as such could be taken by any literate person endowed with a fair memory.

The study of science should have a restricted place in an Arts course. If the student wishes to study science, let him take a science degree. The Arts student's primary interest in science is as a philosopher. He is interested in the methods and effects of science, in the way in which they dominate his thought and determine the world in which he lives. He does not wish to study science, but he wishes to understand the world of science and the world that science makes.

The Arts course is not an artificial thing. In a very profound sense it is not something that can be determined by a committee or a faculty or a senate. They may, indeed must, draw up regulations and lay down conditions, but it is at their

own risk. They may manipulate the clock, but the sun rises and sets regardless.

We all recognize that many students enter on the course one, two, three, or even four years before they are ready. We all know that there are students who graduate as having finished the course who have never really begun it. Our universities are accustomed to give a number of honorary LL.D.'s every convocation. What the public does not realize, is that we give many honorary B.A. degrees as well.

Any mint that turned out as many bad coins as our Arts colleges do, would have lost all standing long ago. The process has been cheapened until there are probably more bad coins turned out than good. No wonder the Arts colleges stand on slippery ground. There is only one way to escape. It is not by further cheapening and debasing the product. Absolute ruin waits at the end of that road.

Self respect and honesty are our only salvation. The Arts course offers a very definite thing: a knowledge of the wisdom of the race. There is no royal road, there are no short cuts, there are no bargains, substitutes are not allowed, cheating is of no avail. An Arts degree ought to be as real a thing and as honest a thing as a degree in medicine or in law or in engineering. Affiliated courses should not be allowed. They are but another example of the cheapening of the Arts degree. In nearly every case they are a fraud and would not be tolerated if there were not so many blind leaders of the blind. The subjects are not accepted because they fill in a carefully thought out Arts course. They are accepted because they fill in gaps in the registrar's office.

If the Arts course is suffering, it deserves to suffer. It is surrendering without being defeated. Bad money drives out good, so the economists tell us. The same thing is happening in the field of what we call a liberal education. So much debased metal has been allowed on the market that we now discuss its value, not the value of pure gold.

Indeed many people have come to doubt the very existence of pure gold. For them the counterfeit has become the real. In talking about the Arts course they talk as if they were discussing a business college. Students must be taught to read their own language and write it clearly and correctly! They must be taught that in a business college. Students must be taught to speak a modern language! They must be taught that in a business college. Students must know more mathematics and have a

better knowledge of spelling! They teach those in a business college. "No, it is not a reformed technique we need; it is a change of soul. If we wish to turn out students of integrity, we must be men of integrity ourselves.

Until we regain our ideal of an Arts college; until we recognize what is the true content of its studies and the true purpose of its existence; until we recognize that while many are called but few are chosen, that we are servants and not masters, that wisdom and truth cannot be bought and sold—then, and not till then, are we going to begin to solve the problem of the Arts college. As long as we think of the problem as a mechanical problem, we are lost. It is not a mechanical problem. It is a moral problem, and only when we realize its moral nature and treat it as such have we the slightest chance of changing the course of events. Above all things we need professors who are teachers—teachers in the full sense of the word, men who know how great is the need and how marvellous is the opportunity. There is no place here for time servers or for personal ambition. There is no place here for the humdrum reading of old notes or for the man who gives only of his second best. His best is none too good.

Here is a life calling for unselfishness and devotion. The true teacher ought to be filled with a religious enthusiasm. It is only in so far as he feels that here are lives to be transformed and ennobled and enriched and that the opportunity is his, that he is worthy of his calling. It is not sufficient that he make scholars; he must do much more than this. He must make his students lovers of truth and beauty and of wisdom. He must know what Burke meant when he said that the end of learning was not knowledge but virtue.

He is doing more than preparing a student for life, he is giving him life itself. He is raising him from the life of the senses to the life of the spirit, calling him to join the bright and shining company of those who by wisdom have transcended the present and have achieved a vision of life both noble and free.