

THE VALUE OF EDUCATIONAL CRITICISM

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EDUCATIONAL systems and methods in the United States and Canada have been the subject of much severe criticism recently. Some of this criticism has been healthy and helpful, and some of it has been both unfair and false. Candid, sympathetic and suggestive criticism is always helpful; but criticism meant to condemn is usually only captious and is sometimes vicious. Above all things, criticism must be fair to the facts, and to the conditions and difficulties under which the worker works. Indeed, as a general rule, I suspect that the sincere, thoughtful worker is in the long run his own best critic. In any case, it is in this spirit that the present essay is intended to be written.

There is in all human institutions, and most of all perhaps in educational institutions, a strange antithesis between the ideal and the real, that is, between the capacity of the human mind to conceive ideals or standards and the pathetic incapacity of human effort to achieve them. We are commanded in all things to attain the unattainable. The claims of perfection are always imperative. There is nothing said which cannot be better said, nothing done which cannot be better done. Science demands perfect truth. It would know everything with the intuitive certainty of a mathematical proposition, and will be satisfied with nothing short of that. Art, always poignantly reaching beyond its grasp to catch in line and colour and harmony some glimpse of beauty, will be satisfied with nothing short of perfect beauty, done at a stroke. Conscience, the plain man's guide and counsellor, will be satisfied with nothing short of unerring rectitude. Indeed, even our lower appetites and desires insist upon demanding perfect satisfaction. Life is a strange paradox, a strange dualism, and yet the problem must be solved. Some synthesis there must be of the real and the ideal, in part at least, if we only try hard enough from now on, or human life is only futile torment and the Father of men a fiend and no true God at all.

Now the fallacy of criticism is that instead of honestly trying to find some synthesis of the real and the ideal, it only makes the ideal the critic of the real; and this type of criticism, if it be carried too far, or touched ever so little by any spirit of bitterness or severity, succeeds only in making the ideal the enemy of the real,

the best the enemy of the better. This method is always fatal. Kant long ago pointed out that ideals are essentially patterns of perfection meant to be aimed at in practice, and that to use them merely as canons of criticism or even as concepts of speculative philosophy is to fall into the profoundest error of the dialectical sophist. Open *Sartor Resartus*, read *The Everlasting Yea* again, and learn that it is by work and not by criticism that ideals are made real. Work's our ware. Culture is not the study of perfection. Culture is the practice of perfection. Ideals are meant for purposes of achievement, and not merely for purposes of contemplation and literary discourse, however delightful. Knowledge of the truth and appreciation of the beautiful are not enough, unless both truth and beauty be first compounded into character and conduct. For example, even if my mind were a perfect mirror and could reflect all the truth and beauty of the universe, the world would be no better for that. The only true synthesis of the real and the ideal is the pragmatic synthesis. That is why I say that the serious worker is probably in the long run his own best critic, and that all criticism to be helpful must be fair to the facts and begin where the worker begins.

First of all, then, just to provoke a few affectations of superiority, I propose this sweeping generalization—that the story of education in Canada and the United States has in fact been about the brightest chapter in all human history. Will anybody try to imagine, for example, what the one hundred and twenty millions of people who came to this continent from Europe during the last century and a half would really be like if it were not for the schools, colleges and universities? It is not from the terms of the Constitution of the United States or of the British North America Act, but from the little red schools on the hills and the plains that the secret of America can be learned. The idea and the method came from the free school system of Scotland, where the lord's lad and the butcher's boy are encouraged to sit side by side on the same bench in the school and at the university. It may be doubted, indeed, if any small nationality of people, not excepting the ancient Greeks, has ever made any equally great and noble contribution to human history. The grades, or, as we usually say, the standards of education, in many of these schools on this continent, or even in many of those institutions calling themselves universities, may have been pitifully poor and low; but that is only to say that they began where they ought to begin, that is, at the bottom. I sometimes doubt if there is the smallest meanest sectarian school in all the land that cannot justify its

foundation. The first clear duty of any system of education, in any case, is to deliver the whole community from gross ignorance, in order that education in the end may shed its light even into the cottages and camps. No other system of education is possible in a democratic country. From that faith we dare not depart, and least of all in this new country of Canada.

The political and economic results of this community system of education are incalculable. That the success or failure of any system of government built upon a universal electoral franchise depends almost altogether upon the education of the masses, is obvious. It seems equally obvious, too, that the maintenance of any privileged class or group is always a heavy first mortgage upon the work of the community. Clearly no single class or group has any first lien on innate natural endowment of ability. The success of the community always depends in the long run upon the sum of opportunity offered to all the human units that reside within its frontiers, and any community, therefore, which neglects the education of a single healthy promising boy or girl is wasting its assets.

That all these propositions I have just stated are true in the professional and technical branches of education is, I think, admitted everywhere. What is not so often recognized, however, is the primary economic value of education in the liberal arts and pure sciences. Education in literature and pure science is often lightly supposed to have no great economic utility of any kind. A little reflection, however, soon discovers the unsoundness of this. In the practical working out of the law of supply and demand, it is always the purchasing public which determines the course of industry and commerce. The producer cannot produce a fine article unless the purchaser show sufficient taste and intelligence to purchase it. It is wholly in vain, therefore, that we train and urge our workmen to produce works of great beauty, precision and power, unless we first create a critical, discerning public to purchase them. This is why any university or system of education which turns its resources in the direction of professional or technical training, at the expense of the liberal arts and pure sciences, is certain to prove a heavy loser in the end. I shall venture even to suggest at this point that the universities and other educational foundations in the United States and Canada have already gone far too far in the direction of subsidizing profit-bearing professions and occupations at the expense of liberal education. Possibly, indeed, this may be the greatest single fundamental fault in the whole system. In any case, it seems obvious enough that the level of human success

in any community can never really rise above its general level of education. The character of any civilization is largely what the schoolmaster makes it. Politicians may win the power and the glory, and the financiers and traders the wealth of the world; but it is the schoolmaster who decides its destiny. I only wish that university men would keep this truism in mind, and learn therefrom the art of being proud and arrogant, that they may hold their heads high at least in reverence of the great masters we have known.

The subject of the last paragraph has probably, however, much more far-reaching significance than may be at first suspected. For example, one of the educational issues being widely discussed at present is the conflict of claims between scholars in the secondary schools who intend to enter the university and those who do not. Every educationist knows that no such conflict should exist, and as a matter of fact no such conflict really does exist. The cardinal virtues of neatness, thoroughness, accuracy, clearness and respect for detail, so loudly insisted upon by the business community, are just as highly desired by the university. A conflict really begins when the business men in the community undertake to advise upon the methods and subjects of study by which they think that these virtues may be acquired in the schools. Instead of advising, for example, the continued study of Latin, English, Mathematics and Physics, in which these virtues are essential, they advise the study of Salesmanship, Accountancy, Commercial Geography, Economics and similar loose, discursive subjects, in which they are seldom found except by the master-teacher who has sufficient academic training to appreciate the value of scholarly work well done in any subject. Give me a scholar who is able to do his Latin prose composition well, to work through a demonstration in quadratic equations correctly and conclusively from beginning to end, and to write six consecutive paragraphs of correct, lucid, readable, entertaining English prose composition on any subject, and I will show you a scholar who, with the necessary ambition and a fair opportunity, will soon learn how to draft a pleading in a lawyer's office which will need no amendment, or to become the general-manager of the biggest banking house in Canada.

The universities, however, also sometimes make the mistake I have just been trying to describe. This mistake usually takes the form of trying to raise the standards of education by increasing the amount of work which the student is required to cover. This is, I believe, a cardinal mistake. It is not the amount of work which the scholar does, but the way he does it that really counts.

What is really needed is not a greater quantity of work, but better work. Much better, for example, a single book of the *Aeneid* or the *Odyssey* done inimitably than a dozen books done in an imperfect, inaccurate, untidy way. The aim, or at least one great aim, of education is to bring the scholar to the point where he may enjoy the experience of work well done in his own soul, even if it be only for an hour or two. That done, he has learned the greatest lesson which any institution can teach him. The standard is the ideal. It is not the average, nor the amount of work which the student has done half-well. If free institutions fail, it will be because of their habit of aiming at averages. The free schools of Scotland never made this mistake. They never forgot nor neglected the lad of parts.

As I have already suggested, the *summum bonum* of educational policy in Canada and the United States has been to provide a common school education for all, and a university education for all who have the determination and ability to achieve it. From this postulate nearly all the principal factors and agencies in the system may easily be deduced. The constant rapid increase in the number of scholars attending school, the overcrowding of class-rooms, the multiplication of teachers, especially of the lower grades and of those casually employed in the profession, the peaceful invasion of the profession by women old and young, the foundation of Normal Schools designed to train teachers of imperfect scholarship to teach all that they really know about the subjects of study they are employed to teach, the futile attempt to measure the scholars' success by an elaborate system of grades and credits, the routine method of teaching by lectures spoken or read to large classes to the almost total neglect of kindly, helpful, personal attention, and all the prevailing habit of aiming at averages, to which I have already referred, are some of the principal consequences which have come, in part at least, from the effort to put this policy of an education for all into universal practice.

While all these efforts and devices just mentioned have been clearly well meant, it is now becoming increasingly clear, however, that the results have not always been satisfactory. We have apparently been straining every nerve to deliver the whole community from gross ignorance, while all the time overlooking the one great source from which final deliverance can ever come to any community, that is, its young men of exceptional devotion and ability. Have we, then, been wasting our available reservoir of opportunity by offering it too lavishly to the many who cannot make use of it, to the prejudice of those who can? I fear that we

have. I shall even venture to make a plea for the privileged boy. Not for the boy privileged by the possession of wealth, for the possession of wealth is seldom a privilege, often a handicap, nor even for the boy born in a refined home, although that is indeed an incalculable blessing, but for the providentially privileged boy, wherever he may be found—the boy who will really be the statesman and the scholar of to-morrow. After all is said, it is the example and leadership of real statesmen and scholars, and of men of vision, devotion and abounding faith which determines the history of any country or community, and most of all a country or community designed upon free democratic principles. The obvious human reason for this great truth is that it is only in the example of other men that ideals are made visible and real to all those who have the will to follow them.

After many years spent as student and instructor in all kinds of schools, from the miscellaneous rural school with a third-class teacher to some of the greatest institutions of higher learning in the world, and after many intimate conversations with successful men in all walks of life, it is not difficult to come to the conclusion that the single greatest influence in any school is the example of work well done by its scholars and the tradition of successful scholars who have attended the school in former years. Let the reader call to mind any good school he knows or remembers, and I am sure that he will recognize the truth of this statement. I can myself name many schools where the memory of men long since gone still plays a powerful part in the work of the school and in the life of the whole community. Any school, therefore, which is content to aim at an average, and which devotes its principal efforts to the poorer class of scholars in order to swell the number of those who succeed in passing a rigid, routine system of graded, written examinations, is already on the down grade, and any central system of school administration which compels or encourages effort of this kind is certain sooner or later to defeat its own best intentions. Every scholar in the schools, good and bad, will suffer sorely in the long run. It is very doubtful, indeed, if work half-well done in the school is of any real value at all in the stress of life. If the schools are getting out of touch with the real life of the community, it is not because they are not doing the right work or enough work, but because they are not doing it well enough to stand the test of real experience.

Perhaps the reader may now think that I am only trying to create a dilemma, or to formulate an educational antinomy to which no intelligent practical answer can be given. The principle of

aiming at an education for all is good, but the results are bad. How can this be? How can the pursuit of any high and noble ideal end in disaster, and, even if disaster threaten, should we not all the more continue to press unremittingly forward in spite of fears? I have already tried to suggest the answers to these questions. It is not the recognition of the ideal, but the making it real in work well done which really counts. Knowledge is not enough. Precepts and rules are not enough. Conscientiousness is not enough. The most conscientious or seemingly conscientious people frequently only defeat their own highest aims. Conscience at best is only a sentiment, and gets nothing done. Indeed, the habit of contemplating ideals of truth, beauty and rectitude, without trying seriously to put them into practice, first in a small way and then, perchance, in a big way, is perhaps the greatest moral danger in human life. It was this habit, I venture to think, more than any other, which undermined the morality of the late Victorian period before the Great War, the period of Pater and Patmore, of Swinburne and Matthew Arnold and all that goodly company of literary tasters and critics who used to delight us so. But the Victorian period has gone, with the other *illuminations* which preceded it—

The beautiful world
'Tis ruined and hurled
By the blow of a Demigod
Shattered.

During the present unsettled period we may, however, be threatened by a similar danger. I refer to the passionate pursuit of what is called pure scientific discovery, and the invention of scientific machines of great power, speed and precision, regardless of what the ultimate effect may be upon the higher human values. Suppose, for example, to illustrate what I mean, that the most significant and interesting problem in experimental science at the present time were the discovery of some powerful explosive capable of destroying a whole city by a single bomb, or the preparation of some deadly poison capable at a single touch of blighting and destroying all living things in a whole countryside, should these discoveries be encouraged or permitted, or should they not? Human nature, I suggest, must answer this question by an emphatic negative. Human life has far too many interests to permit itself to be made the slave of any one of them. Religion, art, literature science, industry, commerce, charity, work and rest all play their part in the good life, and wherever any one of these interests

receives more than its just share of devotion and worship, human slavery is the only result. Where slavery dwells, revolution, war and death are already at the gate and will come in. The greatest period, for example, in French literature, art and fashion was the period of the Bourbons, and all the while the workers and peasantry of France were perishing of poverty and hunger until the mad terrors of the Revolution ensued. What happened to an age of art may also happen to an age of science or to an age of industry. Even religion has been known at times to become the worst of despots.

Perhaps, however, the dangers I have been trying to indicate are the result of a fundamentally false philosophy. I am sometimes inclined to suspect, at any rate, that the old conventional distinction between Mental and Moral Philosophy may have much to answer for. The habit of supposing that the mental powers and the moral powers of man are placed side by side like the two hemispheres of the brain, or located in two different parts of the bodily organism, like the head and the heart, seems to be almost universal. Old monks in the early Middle Ages, from over-zeal of other worldliness, tried to increase the moral powers to the *n*th degree while leaving the mental powers to atrophy; and the modern schoolmen, contrariwise, seem to be trying to increase the mental powers to the *n*th degree while leaving the moral powers to find their own way. Nevertheless any person capable of a little clear abstract thinking can see at once that both these groups of powers are complementary and essential at every moment of human life. The simplest unit of human experience is a sensory-motor event. It is doubtful, indeed, if any simple sense impression or mental process of any kind ever leaves any real mark upon the mind unless it mature into some form of motor habit. Good manners, for example, always an essential in any liberal education, are almost entirely a matter of matured motor habits. The use of language, spoken and written, is really a very delicate complex system of acquired sensory-motor reactions of voice and hand. Those cardinal virtues which I have already mentioned, neatness, thoroughness, accuracy and respect for detail, and I may add discrimination, attention and sustained mental effort of any kind, all fall mainly in the same category. Even the most abstract mental processes really depend upon cerebral and motor habits. I suppose, for example, that the most abstract of all subjects of study is Calculative Mathematics. Every teacher of algebra knows, however, that any fairly good attentive student can easily understand the steps in a difficult algebraic demonstration if simply

and clearly explained to him, and yet this student sometimes cannot perform the simplest exercise correctly on his own account. The reason is obvious. A correct use of mathematical symbols can be learned only in the same way as the musician learns the correct use of the eight-notes in the octave on a musical instrument, that is, by practice. I need not mention other subjects. There is a profound truth in the behaviourist philosophy, which every student of educational method should know. The essential thing about this universe in which we live is that it behaves. The simplest ultimate unit of reality is an event that happens. The synthesis of the real and the ideal can be achieved only by action. Conviction is worthless until it be transmuted into conduct. If I had any system of philosophy, I should call it Pragmatic Idealism.

The proposition now which I wish to deduce from this long argument is that education comes by practice and not by teaching. That is my main thesis. I am convinced that we are placing far too much emphasis upon what the professional pedagogists call the teaching process. After all, the true teacher can do nothing more than help the scholar over the difficult steps in the scholar's own practice of education. Much of the time now spent in teaching or lecturing to classes *en masse* would be better spent if the instructor moved about from seat to seat, helping the deserving scholars over their difficulties in the old-fashioned way. Much better, too, to keep the scholar practising moderately easy exercises than to force the pace before he has acquired the necessary facility in the simpler parts of each subject of study. In any case, I have little faith in the rapid intuitional methods of teaching which have come to us from some of the schools in the United States. I have known some scholars, for example, coming from these schools, who were supposed to have completed geometry, and yet could not set down the sixteenth proposition of the first book of Euclid correctly on an ordinary examination paper, or who were supposed to have "done" say six books of Latin, and yet could not translate accurately a simple verse of Horace either with or without a dictionary. It is one thing to offer an ample opportunity of education to all, and quite another thing to try to compel them all to acquire an education so imperfect, inaccurate and shallow that it cannot be of any real use either to themselves or to anybody else. Let the boy who is willing to work have the right of way. The greatest lesson in life is the lesson of the eight-hour day. If the boy after leaving school go to work in the field, factory or forest, he must be prepared, if he would succeed, to work eight hours every day thereafter. That is the life he must be prepared to face, and to

face it with joy, and the determination to do his day's work well. If any school or university, by offering an educational career, induces the boy to believe that by taking this course he will be able to escape the law of the eight-hour day, then that school or university is doing an ill service both to the boy and to the community.

Finally, I cannot truthfully abstain from sounding a last sombre note. Most of the discussion in this essay falls with greatest emphasis upon the primary and secondary schools. It is in the pre-university schools that habits of work are mainly acquired, and bad habits acquired in these schools are for the most part incurable in the university. The university is not intended to cure or even to carry forward the work of the public school. It is intended to offer an opportunity to the very best class of scholars in the schools to carry the craft of scholarship in literature and science a long way further than the average member of the community. Nevertheless large numbers of the poorest scholars in the high schools, having succeeded in passing the school leaving examinations in the spring, and having nothing better to do, drift into the university in the autumn, and in this way all the methods and failings of the public school are carried forward *en masse* into the university. I cannot help thinking that the university is doing an ill service to the community by entertaining these drifters at all. Life is a devotion, and not a drift. Nevertheless, I see little hope of any great improvement until public school teachers are recognized and remunerated in a measure commensurate with their service to the community, and which in turn would justify the community in demanding a better grade of scholarship and training from the teachers. Perhaps, however, it is humanly impossible to support a really first-class system of education by public taxation alone. It may be vain to hope that the average taxpayer will ever consent to support more than an average school. At all events, I venture to repeat what I have said and written many times before, that I still believe in the private school, especially those schools where boys are taught by men. I do not see how a woman, be she ever so excellent a teacher, can set any real example of scholarship and manliness to a boy between the ages of ten and eighteen years. In England, the public school, or as we call it here the private school, early pre-empted the field of education, and when the time came in 1870 and after to set up a national board system, serious difficulties no doubt occurred; but, on this continent, having laid the foundations wisely and well as we have, why should we not proceed to

complete the edifice? I am well aware of the danger of class distinctions; but possibly democratic communities are too sensitive about class distinctions based upon real differences. Democracy was never designed to wipe out Aristocracy, but to substitute for an Aristocracy of artificial privilege and superstition a real Aristocracy of merit and then, having created this new Aristocracy, to keep on constantly replenishing it. We have learned much from the free schools of Scotland in the past, and we may have much to learn from the great public schools of England in the future.