STUDENT FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

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THE expected manner of coping with the problem of freedom and responsibility within the university community often consists in a more or less inflamed demand for academic freedom and a moralistic demand that students do not forget the social community whence they came and for which they are to provide willing leadership. Whatever value lies in that type of analysis tends to be obscured by the frequency with which it is made. Very often the analysis tends to generate about as much mental fermentation as the usual graduation address. The following collection of thoughts attempts to raise the problem in as critical and personal a manner as is possible and justifiable. The aim of the whole effort is to begin fertile controversy rather than spread contentment with an unpleasant, but inevitable state of affairs. The tone of the analysis is critical throughout. The scope of the little experience that lies behind these contentions is given essentially by the Arts course, and more particularly by philosophy and sociology. Whatever exaggeration may be discovered could perhaps be excused as a necessary antidote to that great historical force, inertia, against which one is probably successful only if one acts in a state of guided passion. Such passion may involve the price of exaggeration.

Yet even with all the academic cautiousness in one's thoughts and feelings, the following thesis seems a close approximation to the truth: provided one accepts a specific evaluative view of culture and freedom (and hence also of the function of the university), it can *not* be said that, on the whole, the representative Canadian undergraduate is a genuinely free student. It can further be said that many students do not realize this. This absence of freedom however, is not contradicted by statements concerning this lack of freedom. On the contrary, the absence of such an awareness of limited freedom is yet further proof of the thesis this paper hopes to establish.

Perhaps this thesis will become more acceptable if we forget it for a moment and remind ourselves of some of the content of the terms *culture*, *freedom* and *university*. Definitions of 'culture' are many and are still a matter of controversy. Descriptively speaking, culture is probably best defined as a system of ex-

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plicit and implicit designs for living. The word *design* here includes both a reference to the actual manner of life and to the ideal demands to which life ought to conform. Unfortunately the many tangents, which tempt one into a consideration of the innumerable problems that hover about this point, must be ignored.

One of the necessary conditions of culture is the cumulative development of consciousness and self-consciousness. Stated in other words: for culture to be possible in our sense there must occur (along side many other developments) the split between the subject and the object. We must be capable of self confrontation, or, if you like, of partial transcendence, of making our selves our own objects, of becoming capable of the concept of 'me', and 'the other' (as person or as thing). Provided the abstraction is not too inclusive, we might say that the cumulative interaction between the intended and unintended consequences of the historical development of consciousness and self-consciousness has helped to make culture possible and has helped to produce some of the various crystallized forms within it.

The forms and activities within culture relevant to the problem of student freedom are, naturally, the emphatically intellectual ones. I am referring here to the human capacity to bestow meanings on events or the absence of events, to raise questions and articulate these with answers and to develop distinctions on the level of emotion and on the level of concepts. (We talk of law, morality, morals and conventions, for instance; we distinguish between such adjectives as *humorous*, *witty*, *comical*, *ironical* and *funny*; we react differently to different temperamental types or different situations). These activities crystallize into stabler forms. We have systems of knowledge. We have systems of interpretation, such as art, literature or ritual. We have these forms partly as a condition for the persistence of culture. When some of these forms become definite, though invisible, structures we may call them institutions. In this sense, the university is an institution. It is an institutionalised agent of human culture. This proposition should establish the relevance of the previous ones and relieve the impatience of those who are concerned with the title of the paper, but not with the introduction.

Yet one more detour is, I fear, necessary. In principle we are agreed that a crisis, or lack of form and direction, has invaded our culture and, hence, our universities. We are not agreed on a

diagnosis or therapy of this condition. The formulae of "explanation" can be Darwinian, apocalyptic, Marxist and so forth. We are furthermore not agreed on the likely and desirable future of our culture or on the nature of its structure and change. Some have faith in "progress", some assert the possibility and necessity of redemption, and still others see culture as a tragic process that demands that, in order to stay alive, we produce the very conditions that will eventually destroy us. Since "facts" concerning these matters do not become available without a large number of assumptions, and since the scale of the question is so large that our minds, in their present scope, find all answers ambiguous, we must be content with a statement of the issue and the absence of a generally demonstrable answer.

Still, we can agree that in our culture there is a lack of a well established main direction in which we want to move. We might even agree that there are incompatible forces at work that produce within us conflicts and insecurity in such a manner that we are not automatically free to think or decide the way we wish. We recognise freedom as something to be won; but we do not always distinguish those grosser obstacles to freedom, which could in part be removed, from the more pervasive ones, which are probably irremovable. Amongst these grosser obstacles would be some of the contradictions of our culture. It is not inevitable that we should have an ethic of brotherly love as well a business ethic of mutual exploitation, or an ethic of equality as well as an elaborate system of discrimination. Amongst the inevitable obstacles to unlimited freedom, on the other hand, is the inescapable need for social organisation. We cannot exist alone, each for himself. We cannot live without some society, at least some of the time. We must accept some plan and some organization.

Yet we are free to ask: what kind of plan and why this one? We are free to ask: what kind of culture is worth the effort and the price? In fact if we, at this particular juncture of history, do not ask this, we are not free. On our answer will depend our concepts of the university and of freedom.

In the last analysis it seems to me that the only kind of culture worth sustained human effort and suffering is the culture in which it is possible to create ideal or material objects in such a manner that one can identify oneself with them in a personal way.

A worker who screws on bolts for 8 or 10 hours a day, or a stenographer who races through letters of no concern to her can

never end a working day with the feeling: this I have done, this is part of me, it is good. On the other hand, positive examples of my ideal are given by the artist or the craftsman. In a different sense the true scholar is also an example; here the personal identification is not with the particular intellectual product so much (especially if this depends for its value on its disinterestedness) as with the process of discovery as such, that is to say with the whole enterprise commonly called the pursuit of truth. It is obvious that in our culture many people are starved for the opportunity of this type of creativeness. It is extremely problematical how in detail we are to create conditions that allow for such creativeness, especially since these conditions involve both "internal" and "external" phases of human existence.

But if, for the time being, we accept this oversimplified view of the worthwhile culture, then we can deduce from it the criteria for the good university, especially with regard to the Arts course.

Naively put, the members of such a good university will, first of all, manifest an ability and enthusiasm for wondering: they will be capable of extensive astonishment and inquisitiveness. In that they will resemble children, who marvel at butterflies or ask: Why am I me? Nothing seems quite as sad as people who can no longer be surprised. When a student once told me proudly that nothing could surprise him any more, I felt that he could hardly have made a more effective condemnation of my whole effort at teaching. The members of this "good" university, then, will not be afraid to marvel at the fact that the human mind can actually raise questions, can actually think of itself or can conceive propositions that answer the question as to how nature is possible.

The members of this university will also be forever enlarging and re-interpreting human experience. When one does not continually enlarge one's scope of thought or one's images one becomes instead the slave of the thoughts and paradigms that were once designed to make one see. There is no such state as "having arrived and standing still". One either seeks or becomes blind. Interpretation and reinterpretation go on essentially with the help of literature, especially comparative literature. It is by difference and comparison that we learn most vividly. We do not know the genius of one language unless we see it from the perspective of the genius of another. We do not understand the essence of Canadian culture unless we con-

ceive it in juxtaposition to another culture. I think students should be exposed to as much French, Russian, German and American literature (to mention only a few) as to English literature. If it cannot be taken for granted that the university is in fact what its name says, universal, we cannot expect any other institution to be world minded, except perhaps large-scale business organizations.

A third group of characteristics of the good university are intellectual courage and adventure. The courageous man starts to think no matter where he ends and no matter whether or not at that "end" (that is, at the point beyond which he cannot think for the moment) he can answer the nasty "so what?" Further, he raises disconcerting questions concerning Life and Death, without feeling that this is *ipso facto* a sign of perversion or weakness.

The good university also encourages intellectual discipline and imagination. The first is obvious. The second is perhaps the greatest problem within the question of student freedom. I shall return to it more specifically later and deal with it now only categorically. To ask for imagination is actually to ask people who exist also to be "alive", to see and not to by-pass the obvious and the unusual. This type of reasoning is often dismissed with the plausible statements that everything has been said before and that originality has a conveniently short memory. Both statements are half-truths with pernicious psychological effects, especially when they are perpetrated inside a university. If professors, and there are such, do not believe that their students could be original and do not strive to create conditions under which this is possible, they should actually not be teaching at all. Originality, in this context, includes both the creation of unique thoughts as well as the effort at arriving at certain insights by one's own efforts. Whether or not these insights have been held by others before is quite irrelevant.

In another sense I am, of course, here raising the problem of vitality. To be sure there must be routine and institutions. But a teacher as teacher—and hence also as student—cannot actually fulfil his calling unless he is more alive, at least some of the time, than, say, the people who count railway tickets in the head office of a railway company. Different occupations probably have to have different degrees of vitality. The lower limits vary. Too much mental activity and need for such activity, given a very dull and mechanical job, might well drive one mad. But I wish that if teachers and students fell

persistently below a lower limit of vitality necessary for the university to stay alive, it would prove lethal, at least in an occupational sense. The degree of vitality needed in a university is of such a quality and quantity that one might well be justified in saying that both teacher and student should be possessed by a "daemon". A teacher or student who is not possessed by a daemon is perverting his calling into a bureaucratic office in which he is easily replaced by one of a dozen other candidates.

The distance from this last criterion to the problem of freedom is relatively shorter than may appear to those who have long ago given up hope that title and content of this paper are at all related. Freedom—for purposes of this discussion—consists in being able to do what in fact one really wants to do. In the case of students, freedom consists in being able to implement real intellectual wants and to be intellectually creative. It is clear, I hope, that the normative view of culture is thus relevant both to the university and to freedom and that the ideal of culture is part of the definition of freedom.

When this trite definition of freedom is spelled out, it follows that true freedom involves two necessary conditions, each of which is insufficient by itself. On the one hand, student freedom involves the *absence* of obstacles and, on the other, the *presence* of a persistent creative intellectual want, as well as the necessary discipline to realize that want in gradual approximations. "Obstacles" include both such external phenomena as compulsory attendance at lectures, recurrent tests and examinations, prescribed textbooks and prerequisites far removed from one's central interests as well as "internal" phenomena, such as the inability to concentrate, despite the fact that one wants to study, personal conflicts between one's desire to study and to make money, and so forth. The intellectual want as the second condition is, most likely, self-explanatory. I mean here a more than fashionable or temporary desire for some intellectual pursuit; a willingness to penetrate some area with the utmost power of one's thought and to accept the unintended consequences generated by such a pursuit. Amongst these consequences two "unpleasant" types stand out in particular: discipline and suffering. The definition of freedom contains an implication of the necessary limits of freedom. In this particular case these are given by the need for discipline. This refers to the obvious, and yet easily forgotten, fact that one does not just pick insights and gain knowledge but that, in-

stead, only on the basis of slowly achieved habits of reading, thinking, questioning and rethinking are intellectually worthwhile achievements usually possible. It should be added, though, that intellectual discipline and daily routine (getting up at a certain time, catching the 8.50 bus, etc.) do not necessarily coincide. There is, in fact, an unruliness about intellectual life. Ideas often come in fits and starts and usually not in accordance with a 9.05 timetable. Also, living outside the daily routine of one's surroundings gives one a distance to the things otherwise taken for granted and thus allows insights that might be lost. Living outside one type of routine is of course not equivalent to the absence of routine as such.

Suffering—and somehow the whole area of suffering, or tragedy, of the significance of death and so forth has been badly neglected in the systematic study of man as it is now carried on through the social sciences—refers to some of the effects of thinking and studying on the scholar, and perhaps his audience. It may be true that the truth shall make us free. It is I think, equally true that the process of discovery—certainly in the social sciences—shall make us sad, at least for some time.

If, then, student freedom consists in being able to implement intellectual wants, it follows that there is little freedom for our undergraduates, partly because of the *presence* of a large number of obstacles and partly because of the *absence* of real intellectual wants in so many students. This is probably not true, in the same sense, of the veterans. In their case, often though by no means always, the absence of intellectual wants is obscured or goes unnoticed because of the presence of serious utilitarian designs and economic responsibilities.

Amongst the most significant types of obstacles to student freedom I would list the following. Within the university—as in many other areas of our society—there is a displacement of energy and concern from ends to means. What should be merely means for the improvement of the quality of intellectual work (such as examinations, marks, rank in class) become the prime motives for study. The pursuit of marks, like the pursuit of money, becomes all important in the search for success! Such values are antithetical to what should actually constitute real success in intellectual affairs. Part of this obstacle is the fetish of note taking and the almost ironical tyranny of the timetable, which makes one fit in courses or try to find another course—whether this be geography or French literature usually matters less than whether or not it comes at 11 or 12 on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

Another serious obstacle to freedom is the generally prevailing, misleading organization of knowledge. Put concisely, one might well wish for a substitution of the logic of functional anthropology for the logic of arithmetic. According to this latter logic, a B.A. equals an education, 20 courses equal a B.A., and 19 courses do not equal a B.A. Ideally speaking, we should study subjects instead of just taking courses. We should study the rise of capitalism or the literature of a certain phase of cultural development. As it is, we take a course in French literature of the 17th century in our third year and a course in English literature of the 17th century in our fourth year (usually the titles are different and we do not even recognise the relation between the two courses), having forgotten the French course because by the time we start the English course the French examination is already 5 months behind us. At the moment, the various single courses we take are also not really specialized, and the general courses are not really comprehensive in the genuine philosophical meaning of that term. Besides, this organization of knowledge leads to misleading implications. Somehow the student is not really systematically made aware of the principle of selection underlying what *is* taught as compared with what *could* be taught; nor is he made aware of what *is* known in relation to what is *not* known. On this account he tends to equate history with the courses he took *in* history, and he tends to think that what is printed and said on one topic is equivalent to all that *need* be said and printed on that topic. The nature of the division and organization of knowledge, and their relation to subject matter should be made far more explicit, or else students become blinded by the very methods that were devised to make comprehension easier. We need, then, a type of organization of knowledge that allows simultaneously for vision and for specialization within the same person. The present alternative produces too often superficiality and technicianship, neither of which makes for freedom of mind.

Another obstacle to freedom is the very obvious fallacy of mistaking bigness for greatness, and confusing quality with quantity. This fallacy is institutionalized by covering too much in too short a time and issuing extensive reading lists. The fallacy also expresses itself in the annoying question: "How long does this essay have to be?" Padding is yet another form of it.

One of the most destructive obstacles to student freedom is the very delicate problem of plagiarism and independence.

It is the obstacle to genuine freedom that is most directly expressive of human weakness, and it is therefore very difficult to remove. I am, of course, referring to the student feeling that he "has" to give back to the professor what the latter gave him, that his views and those of the instructors should coincide if he is concerned with good marks, and that essays are most profitably copied out of well established sources. The real trouble is that many professors fail to convince the student that it is safe and necessary to be independent. Some professors reward just this kind of plagiarism and servility often enough for the general myth of the necessity for it to maintain a powerful and widespread existence, and to keep the majority of students enslaved in the very high-school mentality against which the university should actually revolt.

I asked some forty students whether they found it necessary to study the subject of their professors or the professors of their subject. What perturbed me was not so much the fact that the majority asserted the second alternative, but that they immediately excused it as most natural: "for, after all, professors are only human and do not like too much disagreement. Anyway, we want to get through examinations and we get marks if we hand back what we got from him. Now that we are asked to be independent in one course and docile in another we have to be different people for different courses." It is clear that we reach here a point where the pursuit of truth and the pursuit of mental hygiene and success are obviously incompatible. The sin of plagiarism and laziness of thought is too obvious to need further elaboration. Only one further phase of it might be mentioned just in passing: the problem of textbooks, especially in such fields as philosophy. Surely it is far better to have students grapple with Plato or Descartes or Hume than to hand them a textbook about these thinkers. I think one should first encounter the original achievement rather than hear about it through the views of someone else. It is a question of first things first, so that one can stand in immediate relation to one's subject. When people who take one course in philosophy come out of that course merely with a grounding in some text, it is no less sad than if they had come out of a concert after having read the programme notes just before the music began.

A further group of obstacles arises on the basis of inertia and lack of imagination amongst some university professors. Inertia expresses itself usually in the repetitive handing out of old notes or in opposition towards change. ("This is the way

we have always done it, why should we change now?") Lack of imagination is a further phase of the same phenomenon. The truly imaginative teacher questions the obvious and finds it anything but self-evident. He further combines apparently irrelevant phases of thought. This is especially necessary, because our thinking and knowledge exist on different planes of abstraction. We often experience a bewildering disjunction between these levels. One then comes to speak of the remoteness of thought or the distance between everyday life and the university. Such accusations could easily be proved false if only our teaching showed more vividly the function of general concepts and rules of logic, for instance, in what is called common sense.

Beyond that, the lack of imagination expresses itself also in a lack of comprehensive, comparative and historical methods of thinking. The first lack is directly related to the distaste for philosophy, of which some university professors are even proud. To teach a subject comprehensively is to teach it in relation to a philosophic impulse. The comparative method involves the obvious insight that the essence of a culture or a language, for instance, is understood best as both are recognized as alternatives to the solution of constant or different problems. The lack of historical method could be remedied by a more explicit inclusion of time and of the conditions of birth and death of various cultural products.

But the burden of blame for the obstruction of freedom is not to be placed entirely on the university system or the university teachers. Admittedly, uninspired teaching helps to produce uninspired students, and thus a vicious circle is maintained. But the students themselves are also involved. They are involved in particular to the extent to which they have no persistent intellectual wants. It is not so important that they should know clearly what they want with regard to intellectual matters. That would be too much to expect in as amorphous a culture as ours. It is essential, however, that they should want something of an intellectual nature (in the good sense of the word). It is equally essential that they should want it badly or that they be prepared to yield to wanting it badly. If they are incapable of intellectual passion they merely add to the innumerable intellectual mediocrities that clutter up the universities.

Freedom and responsibility merge at this point. Most specifically, student responsibility is identical with maintaining the intellectual intensity and passion that were previously de-

fined as constituting one of the necessary conditions of freedom. But just as students do not seem to realize in specific detail that they are not free, so they do not define their responsibility in relation to the university community.

At its outer limit, this responsibility has its political implications, especially if the student considers it part of his responsibility to maintain his freedom. In as much as the university is interdependent with other institutions, the freedom found within it is dependent in part on the freedom to be had outside it. The student who wishes to maintain his freedom will therefore have to oppose attempts that lead to loss of freedom, either by fiat—as in the case of the various forms of totalitarianism—or by default—as in the case of an outworn *laissez-faire* attitude.

At its "core" student responsibility involves contributing widely and deeply to the university community. This is obviously not done where the university is looked upon as a social pulley system or a marriage bureau or a finishing school. It is done where the student is a member of the university community by virtue of his intellectual and other contributions. Wherever the intellectual process is explicitly dialectic (as in seminars), student responsibility becomes especially clear and great. Few students seem to realize that the value of a seminar depends as much on them and their preparedness to contribute information and ideas as it does on the abilities of the instructor. We need much explicit education on that point, for often students who object legitimately to too much lecturing and to too little opportunity for discussion really have nothing to say or ask. (The fact that this is true of some professors also is unfortunate, but irrelevant.)

Another type of responsibility easily overlooked is that of faith in the intellectual process. We have been witnessing the understandable and ironical fact that often much intellectual effort goes into discrediting the intellectual process. Marx and Freud are the most recent historical sources of this —which fact does not mean that both do not constitute indispensable and great sources of insight without which we would be very much blinder. Through the concepts of ideology and rationalization, much plausible contempt for the activity of thinking is set free. On further study, however, it would become clear that both terms contain considerable ambiguities. It would also become clear that we are involved in the inevitable circle within which we use reason and thought to discredit both.

The schemes by which we have sought to demonstrate the irrationality of man have always been rational. Since these schemes also constitute part of man, there must be some significant limitations to his irrationality. It is clear that we need a new faith in the value of thinking and ideas. At the moment that faith seems to have sunk to the level of faith in propaganda.

Lastly it is the responsibility of students to quicken their imagination and the agility of their thinking so that they can become members of a world community. Small town perspectives should be incompatible with university ways.

For those who consider this analysis correct within reasonable limits and who consider the state of affairs it sought to describe undesirable there remains the problem of remedies. In principle these are simply stated. We must restate, and perhaps re-discover, the true ends of the intellectual process and distinguish them clearly from the indices by which we judge and measure that process. It may turn out that what we now call means may in some cases be the true end. It may be, for instance, that the process of discovery, rather than the potential products of discovery, is the true end in some disciplines. We must restore our faith in intellectual activity by ridding that activity of some of its obvious sterility and fashioning it more after the activity of the artist. We must maintain within, and despite, the institutional framework of the university a possibility for passion and independence and, more particularly, for the re-examination of popular and other images and paradigms, which as often as not blind us rather than help us see. We must conceive of teaching as an art, and of each lecture as an attempt at a work of art. Notes are incidental. It is the value of our ideas and information, the process of intellectual dialectic and style of our thought that should be our chief concern. We must combine rebelliousness and contemplation so that we can stay alive to the issues of the day without becoming subject to the fads and hysterias that are always tempting us into the acceptance of pseudo-questions and pseudo-solutions.

Some of the enthusiasm of this paper, together with its hopes, is, of course, confronted by limitations. There seems to be an insoluble remnant to all problems. Worse still, one is driven to wonder whether all solutions must create further problems. This paper is probably caught in two paradoxes that limit its claims. On the one hand, education is often the target of the very critical process that it helped to develop. The heartier the indictment, in other words, the more it also becomes a

contradiction. On the other hand all, including those people committed to the intellectual life, seek for some kind of contentment. But probably the intellectual life, without which they would not be happy, needs as one of its preconditions a productive level of discontent—with which they are also not happy.

Besides these limitations, one comes finally to the conclusion that the ultimate condition for freedom is still the wish to be free and the requisite strength to bear one's independence. In that respect it is well to recognize that the traditional distinctions between inner and outer freedom are politically dangerous and psychologically inadequate. Instead, it is urged that freedom is not divisible. It depends on the simultaneous presence of inner and outer conditions that can both be created by the efforts of men.