

EDUCATION AND HUMAN PROBLEMS

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IT seems to be generally accepted by the advance guard of educationists that the educational system of this continent is failing in its purpose. Certainly it is impossible to pick up a so-called "quality" magazine without finding some critical article, and there are books galore which point the accusing finger at our pedagogical pretensions. It would seem to me, however, from a perusal of these somewhat acerbic writings, that the writers are obsessed in the main with education as a sort of abstract ideal, rather than with any purpose it might serve. They confront education as an instrument, without truly and reasonably taking into account just what it is required to do: they would try to remould the instrument without first clearly defining its purpose. And it is a part of my thesis here that until we do clearly define the purpose of education we cannot hope to build an efficient educational system.

Out of the fog of definition that hovers like a pillar of cloud above the educational hosts, two opposing contentions of purpose appear. There is the frank vocationalist who says: "The purpose of education is to fit a man to earn a living," and there is the culturalist who (in effect) says: "The purpose of education is to enable a man to do anything else but earn his living—except as a university professor; the purpose of education is to inculcate culture". The vocationalist I find to be an impatient man, the culturalist a snobbish one. I can see in the ideal of neither, and in the attitude of neither, the hope of a badly educated world. Neither has evolved a satisfying purpose, one which seems to meet the urgency of the need.

I am going to define the purpose of education (in all humility) as an endeavour to fit a man to solve successfully those human problems that beset him. Moreover, I am going to define what I consider to be the three major human problems, and then, in corollary, to suggest that unless our educational system is helping directly as well as indirectly to solve these problems, it is an inefficient instrument which should be either scrapped or reconditioned.

Here are the problems:

- A. The achievement and preservation of physical fitness.
- B. The achievement of a successful niche in the economic system, and a satisfactory adjustment between the individual and the system.
- C. The fullest possible development of personality, and its proper adjustment to environment.

Let us examine them.

The Achievement and Preservation of Physical Fitness.

No one can deny that this is a major human problem. Indeed, one might call it the basic human problem, since life itself depends on its successful solution. A man must live, but more than that, he must enjoy a fair degree of health in order either to dig out his place in the economic sun or to develop his personality to its fullest. There are notable exceptions, but one does not have to labour the point that the man who is physically below par faces his other problems under a terrific handicap.

It is perhaps not so generally recognized that there are factors at work in our civilization which are tending quite definitely to impair the physique of the race. Every fresh labour-saving device, every new comfort-producer, plays its part in lowering human stamina—until it has become a commonplace among students of military science that Caesar's legionaries were giants in performance and endurance compared with those of Foch and Hindenburg. There is that ever-growing body of people with inherent physical defects that medical science is keeping alive and allowing to reproduce its kind. Finally, there is that tremendous sweep towards urbanization, that crowding together of men into big cities whose atmospheres reek with the poisons of civilization and where there is not enough sunlight, enough pure air, nor enough room for exercise.

The problem of physical health is therefore becoming an urgent one, and one in which education must interest itself if further deterioration is to be prevented. Generally speaking, our educational system does not now concern itself with this matter. Some schools permit, without encouraging, athletics; other schools encourage athletics for their publicity value; but as a definite discipline, aimed at the building up of health and stamina, few schools undertake physical training.

If this major problem of achieving and maintaining physical fitness is to be solved, the educational system must do certain things. It must—

- (1) Give a man a fairly comprehensive understanding of his body and its functions.
- (2) Instil the elements of personal hygiene.
- (3) Provide some definite scheme of physical training.

Physical well-being is the proper action of those myriad cells which make up the diversified and interdependent structures of the human body. How can one intelligently preserve and direct this without knowing the characteristics of those cells and their manner of interdependence? How can the mechanic properly run his engine if he knows nothing of its mechanism? It is an axiom of all progress that understanding must come before change. Who, viewing the present human physique in civilized countries, will say that change is not imperative? I submit, therefore, that if education is going to help man to solve this vital problem of physical well-being, it must instruct him in human anatomy and physiology, together with the necessary concomitant biology.

Incidentally, an understanding of the biological sciences will serve other salutary purposes. In the first place, along with psychology with which I shall deal later, and providing it is taught early enough, a knowledge of biology will do much to cleanse our attitude towards matters of sex, an attitude which is still dogged by taboos and phobias born out of the darkest recesses of human superstition. That an incalculable amount of harm, physical and psychical, is inherent in our attitude towards this most important physiological function, no one who knows the facts will deny. Furthermore, a study of the biological sciences places a man in his proper niche in the evolutionary scale, and if it served no other purpose than this would be of inestimable value. One of the outstanding reasons why our rulers, political and social, are making so many tragic mistakes is that they have not yet grasped the implications of evolution. Otherwise, they would not attempt so desperately and disastrously to cling to the *status quo*; they would know that all human institutions are in a state of flux, and that he who tries to prevent this is holding the wind back with a reed.

Then there is the question of personal hygiene. While it is customary for a man to learn certain of the rudiments in his own family circle, this knowledge is usually of a haphazard nature, of doubtful value, and tainted too highly with the questionable wisdom of old wives. For instruction in personal hygiene to be consistent, enlightened and efficient, it must be given by people trained to that purpose. Some teaching along this line has crept into the

educational system; but that it is as comprehensive and vital a part of the scheme as it should be, I cannot agree.

As for physical training, it is not too much to say that the educational system has failed absolutely to grapple with the subject. Perhaps in the old pioneer days when every student walked a mile or so to school and returned home to cut the supper wood, feed the cattle and perform other similar tasks, it was not necessary to include it in the curriculum. But those pioneer days are gone for most of humanity, and fast going for the rest. The situation to-day is different, and calls for a different attitude. What once might have been no business of education is now education's business. Yet we find that so-called "athletics" is practically the only physical training associated with the schools, and is more the result of student than of teacher activity. What is more, we have many city schools without proper playgrounds on which athletics can be indulged.

But when I speak of physical training, I do not mean athletics in the sense in which the word is commonly used. I refer to something much less precarious, a discipline in which every student shall take part. I have in mind not only a return to the Greek ideal of the body, but the adoption of something of the technique that has grown out of the physical awakening in the German schools, where the achievement of grace is associated with that of fitness, where beauty and health are twin ideals.

The Achievement of a Successful Niche in the Economic System, and a Satisfactory Adjustment Between the Individual and the System.

This second major problem is held by most people—in practice if not in theory—to be the most important of all human problems. Such a conception is bound to have a large following in a capitalistic society, where the outstanding effort of the people and the State is towards the accumulation of wealth. But that, as a human problem, it is more important than the other two I have cited, I will not believe. Nevertheless it is an important one, and certainly its successful solution plays a not inconsiderable part in the solution of the other two. If the individual is to do his best with life, he must achieve some success in the economic world; he must feel, moreover, that the economic system is treating himself and his fellows fairly; he must have some enthusiasm for his work, and it should prejudice neither his health nor his social principles.

Just how much or what type of education the average man requires to fit himself successfully into the economic system, is

open to argument. The doctor, lawyer, engineer, chemist, teacher and other such specialists require of course a great deal of highly organized instruction; but at what stage in the educational scheme this special training, or its foundations, should begin is also debatable. (Perhaps even the foundations do not need to be laid until that training which will solve these basic problems has been completed). But it is doubtful if the rest of humanity requires much more than a fair knowledge of the three R's in order to fit it to do its work efficiently. Lack of extensive education does not appear to militate against economic success in industrial, artistic or political life. Of the four great builders of modern American industry, Rockefeller, Edison, Ford and Morgan, only the last went to a university; the other three had the merest taint of schooling. Whitman, the greatest American poet, Dreiser, the ablest living exponent of American fiction, and Mark Twain had very little education. In an older land Leverhulme, Lipton and Northcliffe, *primi* among merchant princes and newspaper proprietors; Lloyd George, whose spoken word and Churchill, whose written word, have stirred and moved their generation, had little more than the three R's. It would seem then that, except for the specialist, not much more than an ability to read intelligently, write intelligibly, and do minor book-keeping is necessary in order that a man may earn a satisfactory living. And this would suggest that the secondary education of this country suffices for the purpose.

In fact some people can see very little else that the secondary education of this country does. Including under the term secondary education all that which gives a matriculation into the colleges, one might well describe it as utilitarian with faint cultural hankerings. Remove the "faint cultural hankerings"—they are so faint that their loss would be barely felt—and our secondary education does no more than enable one to read intelligently, write intelligibly and do minor book-keeping. My quarrel with it is that it takes ten years, the ten awakening years of life, in which to do little else than this.

But such a type of education will not suffice even for the solving of the economic problem, if there is to be a proper adjustment between the individual and the system. Whether a man is economically successful or not, he should to some degree be satisfied with the conditions under which he works. There are two ways in which this can happen. He can either, having faith in it, adjust himself to the current system; or he can take part in readjusting an imperfect system into one in which he can have faith. It is surely not enough that a man should reconcile himself blindly to any system,

through ignorance of its imperfections, or through indifference, or through a compromise that degrades him.

But how can a man intelligently adjust himself to, and have faith in, a system concerning which he knows practically nothing? How can he be sure it is the best system when he is ignorant of others that might possibly be better? Our present educational system (secondary) gives him no enlightenment, for it is entirely obsessed with the three R's. The current newspapers and popular magazines lend little aid; seem, indeed, to be partners in a conspiracy to delude. It is left for the few students of economics to know what there is to know and they, if vocal, are voices crying in the wilderness.

But surely, if the problem of adjustment is to be solved, this information must get into the head of every school child. Let no one say that economics is too complex a subject for tender minds. It is really no more complex than mathematics, and is capable of being made just as subjective; nor does one expect the schools to develop economic Einsteins. But by the time a man is finished with his secondary education, he should know something of the economic structure of his own and other countries. Only through such a knowledge is there any hope of a sane solution of this outstanding human problem, of righting those rank injustices under which so many human beings sweat and suffer, of achieving quick adjustments in the evolving economic structure as from time to time it shows weaknesses and faults. It is perfectly evident that weaknesses and faults of the gravest nature exist in our economic structure, but because of our abysmal ignorance concerning even the fundamentals most of us do not know either why they are there or how they might be remedied. Civilization has been built on a basis of understanding. Man has gained the mastery over nature, only when he understood nature. Before he could change a thing, he had to comprehend it. That surely is an historical triumph, but it is one, I maintain, which the bulk of men have not yet grasped, and concerning the vital implications of which our educationalists seem to have an extraordinarily vague notion.

The Fullest Possible Development of Personality, and its Proper Adjustment to Environment.

This is a complex problem, and its successful solution hinges not only on that of the previous two problems but on much else besides. From the moment of birth until the day we die, our lives consist in a struggle between those instincts and tendencies with which we are born and the environment in which we find ourselves.

It is a struggle towards adjustment, and in the course of its vicissitudes our individualities, our characters, are forged. In its earlier stages we have little, if any, understanding of our environment, and no control over it. Even later, when we have achieved some degree of "knowledgeableness", our understanding remains small, and our controls remain pathetically limited. When Henley sang bombastically: "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul", he was really whistling to keep his courage up.

Perhaps our greatest handicap in this struggle between impulse and environment is our ignorance not only of our impulses and their nature, but of our environment. Another great handicap is that our elders, while worldly-wise concerning environment (and often wrong in their apparent wisdom), know tragically little about either our or their own impulses, and because of that ignorance wreck our characters in the process of formation, or warp them badly. And finally our educational system, for the most part, fails to interest itself in us as individuals; it treats us only as a mass of youth to be hammered and shaped to a standard concerning which even it is vague. It treats us as "an undifferentiated pile of human atoms reacting similarly to similar stimuli."

How can the individual develop his personality if he does not know what goes into the making of that personality? How can a man evaluate his impulses, much less control them, if he knows little of the basic instincts on which they are built? I am convinced that we will continue to ride the wild horses of our impulses blindfold, with the pack of stupid prejudices howling at our heels, until the study of human psychology gets into the schools.

The cynical declare that psychology is the silly sister of the sciences. Surely this is a stupid and superficial view. The science is comparatively a new one, and had to wait on the biological sciences before it could come into its own; but that the discoveries made in the last forty years by Freud, McDougall, Morton and others have not already illuminated extensively the vast subterranean caverns of the human psyche, only a fool could affirm. It is possible to-day to understand and evaluate as never before the well-springs of thought and action, and through that understanding to achieve a discipline that will develop richer and fuller individualities.

I affirm again, therefore, that if a man would solve this problem of developing his personality to the fullest, he must understand human psychology. But he must also learn to understand his environment, an environment that can be divided roughly into a non-human and a human part. Over nature, the non-human environment, man has already achieved a considerable triumph

through the understanding of it which science has given him. His victories over himself, and over his fellows, have been nothing like as outstanding. Yet, to put it in the words of a modern student of society; "Man, before he can achieve anything substantial, must learn to control not only nature but also the social organizations, the relationships between man and man". Otherwise he will remain a slave to social and economic systems which bear down heavily on him and prevent him from expressing himself to the fullest; he will suffer wars that grow steadily more inhuman and disastrous.

One of the greatest thinkers of the day has written: "It need not be said that a culture which leaves unsatisfied and drives to rebelliousness so large a number of its members neither has a prospect of continued existence, nor deserves it". These are grave words, but one has only to read the current literature to match them with others quite as ominous. Everywhere thoughtful men are asking: Is this civilization destroying itself? Many of them state quite categorically that it is and state, in effect, that it is because man "is still, in the main, as ignorant as any terrified savage of the nature of his relationship with his fellow-men". Isn't the implication clear enough? If man has gained mastery over his non-human environment through understanding it, should he not make, before it is too late, the attempt to gain mastery over his human environment by understanding his fellow-men? Yet how else can he gain that understanding except by learning the nature of society and its organizations, the nature of men and their impulses? And where can he be taught this except in the schools during those plastic and formative years when alone he can be deeply impressed?

So far, in the solution of this problem of developing personality and adjusting it to environment, I have dealt only with enlightenment. And while I believe that to understand a problem implies changing it, I believe that there is need of something more positive than this. I believe that there should be a definite attempt at character-building. Our educational system does not appear to trouble itself greatly along this line. I admit frankly, however, that such an attempt on the part of the educational authorities would be fraught with dangerous possibilities. On the one hand there is the peril of the tawdry and slipshod Y. M. C. A. technique, and on the other some such standardized type-building as the English public schools practise. From the former, Allah preserve us! The trouble with the English public school ideal is not that it is an ignoble one, but that it is a standard one—and its slogan

has been too often: "Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton." I admit its efficiency in an imperialistic scheme, and that it has produced great characters, but I ask myself how many equally great characters it has wrecked in forcing them to a standard to which their personalities could not be reconciled. Personality cannot be developed by forcing men into any standard conception, however splendid.

But this would be a danger if the educational system took on the business of character-building. Educationists love standards with a jealous love. One has only to look at present day pedagogy to see that all over this continent it has bent its efforts to turning out standardized minds—and damn those who will not conform! Every child must learn the same lessons in the same way and pass the same examinations according to the same standards, to the end that we may become those things that, being equal to the same things, are equal to one another.

So if the educational system is to indulge in character-building, it will have to learn to treat the student as an individual, with a personality differing from every other personality. Unless that is done, the matter had better be left as it is. But if it could be done under the guidance of wise teachers whose attitude was not, "How best can I beat this metal into the shape of my prejudices"? but "How best can I help this youth to dig out the golden ore that is in him?" a great deal of human good could be accomplished.

Who, looking fairly at the obscene spectacle of the industrial, social and political life of this continent, can deny that there is need for the development of a more brittle sense of honour in those who are to succeed to the spectacle if the latter is to be made less obscene? But who, viewing the student life of this continent where time and opportunity are squandered prodigally except in the weeks immediately prior to examinations; who, viewing college sport with all its abominations, can say that this development is taking place? Surely, realizing the need, our educational system should interest itself in an attempt to inculcate those basic qualities of honour, justice, compassion and self-control which have been considered noble virtues as long as men can remember, yet which men find so hard to practise.

To recapitulate, then, it would seem necessary that if our educational system is to help all men to solve those basic problems with which living confronts them, the following is essential:

- A. A sufficient knowledge of the biological sciences to enable men to understand the structure and functions of their bodies, and their place in the evolutionary scale. A physical

training that will preserve health and artificially renew that bodily stamina and efficiency of which civilization has been depriving them.

- B. Sufficient training in the three R's to enable them to find a decent niche in the economic system, and enough understanding of that system to adjust themselves intelligently to it, or it to their ideals.
- C. A comprehensive knowledge of the nature of their own and their fellows' personalities. An intelligent understanding of social history, and of the social system and its evolution. A thorough training in the basic virtues.

There are three arguments against all this. There is first the fairly legitimate contention that, even beatified with such an education, most men would be incapable of using it intelligently; but since the same contention can be urged against any system of education, it has no validity. Then there is the matter of finding time for it in the curriculum. And lastly, there is the very natural query: Where are teachers, sufficiently trained, to be found?

The time objection is the less serious of the two. It is my firm conviction that far too much time is spent at present both in teaching the three R's and in teaching various non-essential vocational and "cultural" subjects; and that, touching the three R's, these are being taught too often as disciplines and not for the practical benefits ensuing. Surely ninety per cent. of pupils emerging from high school do not need the amount of mathematics they have been taught. Is the time spent in multiplying and dividing, adding and subtracting huge and unwieldy integers, and working out trick problems, essential to the solution of life's problems? Are algebra and geometry necessary, except to the specialist? I agree that they constitute a discipline, but I affirm that for most of us they constitute a sterile one, and that these other forms of training I have envisaged are not only as efficient as disciplines, but more fertile in the realm of human need. The placing of mathematics in its proper niche would clear a large amount of time for this other, more vital training.

Then there is the time given under the present system to the study of languages living and dead. I cannot rid myself of the suspicion that we have here missed the forest for the trees, and continue to make a fetish of languages, particularly the classic, because of a combination of traditional-mindedness and intellectual snobbery. What serious value can a knowledge of another language have for any but the specialist, except to open wide the thought and literature of that people whose tongue it was? A discipline? But I have suggested that there are other disciplines more vital.

Once, I agree, it was necessary to know Latin and Greek in order to get at the precious store of classic thought, but that necessity has lain dead and buried these hundred years. One of the prime advantages of being born to the English tongue is that all human thought has been, or is being, as soon as evolved, translated into it. Why waste the time of youth learning to use a tool that is unnecessary? Why teach youth to unlock a door that is already wide open? And the argument that, since the English language has been derived from the Teutonic and Latin languages, a knowledge of these gives one a better appreciation of the meaning of words loses its validity when one recalls that most of the words borrowed or derived have lost their original meanings in the process of linguistic evolution.

Then there is history. A fair amount of time is devoted to this study in the secondary schools, but I fail to see much value—certainly as effecting the solution of the problems I have submitted—in the type of history taught, which deals, in the main, with human events. The significance of history, as I see it, lies not so much in events as in those movements of men and ideas they dramatize. Every child on the continent knows that there was a War of 1812, but of the thousands who can recite the exploits of Lieutenant Perry or Laura Secord how many have any idea of the real causes of that conflict? What is more, too much of the history taught in our schools is distorted by an uncouth nationalism. The place of all of it could be taken with advantage by a type of social history that would trace more definitely those movements, their causes and effects, whereby man has progressed or backslidden on the hard road upward.

With such a weeding out as a beginning, I see no reason why ample time might not be found for the additions I have outlined. But the provision of men and women competent to teach these additions intelligently is a much more serious matter. I am only too aware of the inadequate equipment of the teaching body for the little they are called upon to teach even now. What is more, a great deal of the knowledge that would be required by teachers carrying out the ideal I have in view is still unsystematized, and much of it in the brains of only a few men. I realize, therefore, that the lack of teaching equipment is a great obstacle in the way. That it is an insurmountable one, I will not agree.

One naturally looks to the universities for a lead in any forward educational movement, but that they have realized neither the major human problems nor their means of solution through education only a glance at their curricula makes plain. I take the

curriculum for the ordinary degree of one of them, and study its requirements. It is a Canadian university, and not a particularly large one, but since it has produced presidents for several universities on the continent, including Cornell, and professors for innumerable colleges on both sides of the line, including the present incumbent of the chair of English at Harvard, it might justly be expected to show some leadership in this most important matter. I find that it considers certain studies to be so essential that they are made compulsory. What are these studies? Latin or Greek and one other language; history and mathematics; one of four sciences. A dead language and a living one, in a country where no language dead or living hides vital secrets! Mathematics which except for the specialist, is a pure discipline, and a sterile one at that! The history of Europe since the fall of the Roman Empire, which is mainly a history of events and not of human movements and their causes! An elementary course in one of four sciences, one of which *may* be biology! These are vital! Through these the future college president and professor shall give leadership; with these the ordinary *baccalaureatus* shall solve the problem of living!

What *is* the purpose of education? Is it to inculcate by means of sterile discipline a mass of uncorrelated and unsystematized knowledge, in the hope that through some miracle of mental digestion the youth of the land will achieve that vague ideal the educationist calls culture? Or is its purpose to help men to solve those major problems with which the race is faced, and which must be solved if disaster is to be avoided? If it is the latter, I take my stand with those who believe that the present system of secondary education on this continent constitutes a tragic human failure.