

"Notes on Education and Culture"

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During the recent war an exceptional number of books were published on the subject of education; there were also voluminous reports of commissions, and an incalculable number of contributions on this subject in periodicals. It is not my business, nor is it within my competence, to review the whole of current educational theory; but a few comments on it are in place, because of the close association, in many minds, between education and culture. What is of interest to my thesis is the kind of assumption which is made by those who write about education. The notes which follow comment on a few such prevalent assumptions.

I. That, before entering upon any discussion of Education, the purpose of Education must be stated.

This is a very different thing from defining the word 'education'. The Oxford Dictionary tells us that education is 'the process of bringing up (young persons)'; that it is 'the systematic instruction, schooling or training given to the young (and, by extension, to adults) in preparation for the work of life'; that it is also 'culture or development of powers, formation of character'. We learn that the first of these definitions is according to the use of the sixteenth century; and that the third use appears to have arisen in the nineteenth. In short, the dictionary tells you what you know already, and I do not see how a dictionary could do more. But when writers attempt to state the purpose of education, they are doing one of two things: they are eliciting what they believe to have been the unconscious purpose always, and thereby giving their own meaning to the history of the subject; or they are formulating what may not have been, or may have been only fitfully, the real purpose in the past, but should in their opinion be the purpose directing development in the future. Let us look at a few of these statements of the purpose of education. In *The Churches Survey Their Task*, a volume

published in connection with the Oxford Conference on Church, Community and State in 1957, we find the following:

Education is the process by which the community seeks to open its life to all the individuals within it and enable them to take their part in it. It attempts to pass on to them its culture, including the standards by which it would have them live. Where that culture is regarded as filial, the attempt is made to impose it on younger minds. Where it is viewed as a stage in development, younger minds are trained both to receive it and to criticise and improve upon it.

This culture is composed of various elements. It runs from rudimentary skill and knowledge up to the interpretation of the universe and of man by which the community lives...

The purpose of education, it seems, is to transmit culture: so culture (which has not been defined) is likely to be limited to what can be transmitted by education. While 'education' is perhaps allowed to be more comprehensive than 'the educational system', we must observe that the assumption that culture can be summed up as skills and interpretations controverts the more comprehensive view of culture which I have endeavoured to take. Incidentally, we should keep a sharp eye on this personified 'community' which is the repository of authority.

Another account of the purpose of education is that which sees it in terms of political and social change. This, if I have understood him, is the purpose which fires Mr. H. C. Dent. 'Our ideal', he says in *A New Order in English Education*, 'is a full democracy.' Full democracy is not defined; and, if full democracy is attained, we should like to know what is to be our next ideal for education after this ideal has been realised.

Mr. Herbert Read gives his account of the purpose of education in *Education Through Art*. I do not think that Mr. Read could see quite eye to eye with Mr. Dent, for whereas Mr. Dent wants a 'full democracy', Mr. Read says that he 'elects for a libertarian conception of democracy', which I suspect is a very different democracy from Mr. Dent's. Mr. Read (in spite of elects for) is a good deal more precise in his use of words than Mr. Dent; so, while he is less likely to

confuse the hasty reader, he is more likely to confound the diligent one. It is in electing for a libertarian conception of democracy, he says, that we answer the question 'what is the purpose of education?' This purpose is further defined as 'the reconciliation of individual uniqueness with social unity'.

Another kind of account of the purpose of education is the uncompleted account, of which Dr. F. C. Happold (in *Towards a New Aristocracy*) gives us a specimen. The fundamental task of education, he tells us, is 'training the sort of men and women the age needs'. If we believe that there are some sorts of men and women which are needed by every age, we may remark that there should be permanence as well as change in education. But the account is incomplete, in that we are left wondering who is to determine what are the needs of the age.

One of the most frequent answers to the question 'what is the purpose of education?' is 'happiness'. Mr. Herbert Read gives us this answer too, in a pamphlet called *The Education of Free Men*, by saying that he knows of no better definition of the aims of education than that of William Godwin: 'the true object of education... is the generation of happiness.' 'The Government's purpose', said the White Paper which heralded the latest Education Act, 'is to secure for children a happier childhood and a better start in life.' Happiness is often associated with 'the full development of personality'.

Dr. C. E. M. Joad, showing more prudence than most of those who attempt to answer this question, holds the 'which seems to me a very sensible one, that education has a number of ends. Of these he lists three (in *About Education*, one of the most readable books on the subject that I have consulted):

1. To enable a boy or girl to earn his or her living
2. To equip him to play his part as the citizen of a democracy.
3. To enable him to develop all the latent powers and faculties of His nature and so enjoy a good life.

It is a relief, at this point, to have presented to us the simple and intelligible notion that equipment to earn one's living is one of the purposes of education. We again note the close association between education and democracy here also Dr. Joad is perhaps more prudent than Mr. Dent or Mr. Read in not qualifying his 'democracy' by an adjective. 'To develop all the latent powers and faculties' appears to be a variant of 'the full development of personality': but Dr. Joad is sagacious in avoiding the use of that puzzling word 'personality'.

Some, no doubt, will disagree with Dr. Joad's selection of purposes. And we may, with more reason, complain that none of them takes us very far without getting us into trouble. They all contain some truth: but as each of them needs to be corrected by the others, it is possible that they all need to be adjusted to other purposes as well each of them needs some qualification. A particular course of education may, in the world in which a young person finds himself, be exactly what is needed to develop his peculiar gifts and yet impair his ability to earn a living. Education of the young to play their part in a democracy is a necessary adaptation of individual to environment, if a democracy is what he is going to play his part in: if not, it is making the pupil instrumental to the accomplishment of a social change which the educator has at hem--and this is not education but something else. I am not denying that a democracy is the best form of society, but by introducing this standard for education, Dr. load, with other writers, is leaving it open to those who believe in some other form of society which Dr. load might not like, to substitute (and so far as he is talking about education only, Dr. load could not confute him) some account like the following: 'One of the purposes of education is to equip a boy or girl to play his or her part as the subject of a despotic government.' Finally, as for developing all the latent powers and faculties of one's nature, I am not sure that anyone should hope for that: it may be that we can only develop some powers and faculties at the expense of others, and that there must be some choice, as well as inevitably some accident, in the direction Which anyone's development takes. And as for the good life, there is some ambiguity in the sense in which we shall 'enjoy' it; and what the good life is, has been a subject of discussion from early times to the present day.

What we remark especially about the educational thought of the last few years, is the enthusiasm with which education has been taken up as an instrument for the realisation of social ideals. It would be a pity if we overlooked the possibilities of education as a means of acquiring wisdom; if we belittled the acquisition of knowledge for the satisfaction of curiosity, without any further motive than the desire to know; and if we lost our respect for learning. So much for the purpose of education. I proceed to the next assumption.

2. That Education makes people happier

We have already found that the purpose of education has been defined as the making people happier. The assumption that it does make people happier needs to be considered separately. That the educated person is happier than the uneducated is by no means self-evident. Those who are conscious of their lack of education are discontented, if they cherish ambitions to excel in occupations for which they are not qualified; they are sometimes discontented, simply because they have been given to understand that more education would have made them happier. Many of us feel some grievance against our elders, our schools or our universities for not having done better by us: this can be a way of extenuating our own shortcomings and excusing our failures. On the other hand, to be educated above the level of those whose social habits and tastes one has inherited, may cause a division within a man which interferes with happiness; even though, when the individual is of superior intellect, it may bring him a fuller and more useful life. And to be trained, taught or instructed above the level of one's abilities and strength may be disastrous; for education is a strain, and can impose greater burdens upon a mind than that mind can bear. Too much education, like too little education, can produce unhappiness.

3. That Education is something that everyone wants.

People can be persuaded to desire almost anything, for a time, if they are constantly told that it is something to which they are entitled and which is unjustly withheld from them. The spontaneous desire for education is greater in some communities than in others; it is generally

agreed to be stronger in the North than in the South of England, and stronger still in Scotland. It is possible that the desire for education is greater where there are difficulties in the way of obtaining it—difficulties not insuperable but only to be surmounted at the cost of some sacrifice and privation. If this is so, we may conjecture that facility of education will lead to indifference to it; and that the universal imposition of education up to the years of maturity will lead to hostility towards it. A high average of general education is perhaps less necessary for a civil society than is a respect for learning.

4. That Education should be organised so as to give 'equality of opportunity'.

It follows from what has been said in an earlier chapter about classes and elites, that education should help to preserve the class and to select the elite. It is right that the exceptional individual should have the opportunity to elevate himself in the social scale and attain a position in which he can exercise his talents to the greatest benefit of himself and of society. But the ideal of an educational system which would automatically sort out everyone according to his native capacities is unattainable in practice; and if we made it our chief aim, would disorganise society and debase education. It would disorganise society, by substituting for classes, elites of brains, or perhaps only of sharp wits. Any educational system aiming at a complete adjustment between education and society will tend both to restrict education to what will lead to success in the world, and to restrict success in the world to those persons who have been good pupils of the system. The prospect of a society ruled and directed only by those who have passed certain examinations or satisfied tests devised by psychologists is not reassuring: while it might give scope to talents hitherto obscured, it would probably obscure others, and reduce to impotence some who should have rendered high service. Furthermore, the ideal of a uniform system such that no one capable of receiving higher education could fail to get it, leads imperceptibly to the education of too many people, and consequently to the lowering of standards to whatever this swollen number of candidates is able to reach.

Nothing is more moving in Dr. Joad's treatise than the passage in which he expatiates on the amenities of Winchester and Oxford. Dr. Joad paid a visit to Winchester and while there, he wandered into a delightful garden. One suspects that he may have got into the garden of the Deanery, but he does not know what garden it was. This garden set him to ruminating about the College, and its 'blend of the works of nature and man'. 'What I see,' he said to himself, 'is the end-product of a long-continuing tradition, running back through our history, in this particular case, to 'the Tudors.' (I cannot see why he stopped at the Tudors, but that was far enough to sustain the emotion with which his mind was suffused.) It was not only nature and architecture that impressed him; he was aware also of 'a long tradition of secure men leading dignified and leisured lives'. From Winchester his mind passed to Oxford, to the Oxford which he had known as an undergraduate; and again, it was not merely architecture and gardens upon which his mind dwelt, but also men:

But even in my own time... when democracy was already knocking at the gates of the citadel it was so soon to capture, some faint aftermath of the Greek sunset could be observed. At Balliol, in 1911 there was a group of young men centring upon the Grenfells and John Mannfers, many of whom were killed in the last war, who took it for granted that they should row in the College boat, play hookey or rugger for the College or even for the University, act for the O.U.D.S., get tight at College Gaudies, spend part of the night talking in the company of their friends, while at the same time getting their scholarships and prime and Firsts in Greats. The First in Greats was taken, as it were, in their stride. I have not seen such men before or since. It may be that they were the last representatives of a tradition which died with them

It seems strange, after these wistful reflections, that Dr. Joad should end his chapter by supporting a proposal of Mr. R. H. Tawnay: that the public schools should be taken over by the State and used as boarding schools to accommodate for two or three years the intellectually abler secondary school boys from the ages of sixteen to eighteen. For the conditions over which he pronounces such a tearful valedictory were not brought about by

equality of opportunity. They were not brought about, either, by mere privilege; but by a happy combination of privilege and opportunity, in the blend he so savours, of which no Education Act will ever find the secret.

5. The Mute Inglorious Milton dogma.

The Equality of Opportunity dogma, which is associated with the belief that superiority is always superiority of intellect, that some infallible method can be designed for the detection of intellect, and that a system can be devised which will infallibly nourish it, derives emotional reinforcement from the belief in the mute inglorious Milton. This myth assumes that a great deal of first-rate ability--not merely ability, but genius--is being wasted for lack of education: or, alternatively, that if even one potential Milton has been suppressed in the course of centuries, from deprivation of formal teaching, it is still worth while to turn education topsy-turvy so that it may not happen again. (It might be embarrassing to have a great many Miltons and Shakespeares, but that danger is remote.) In justice to Thomas Gray, we should remind ourselves of the last and finest line of the quatrain, and remember that we may also have escaped some Cromwell guilty of his country's blood. The proposition that we have lost a number of Miltons and Cromwells through our tardiness in providing a comprehensive state system of education, cannot be either proved or disproved: it has a strong attraction for many ardent reforming spirits.

This completes my brief list--which is not intended to be exhaustive---of current beliefs. The dogma of equal opportunity is the most influential of all, and is maintained stoutly by some who would shrink from what seem to me its probable consequences. It is an ideal which can only be fully realised when the institution of the family is no longer respected, and when parental control and responsibility passes to the State. Any system which puts it into effect must see that no advantages of family fortune, no advantages due to the foresight, the self-sacrifice or the ambition of parents are allowed to obtain for any child or young person an education superior to that to which the system finds him to be entitled. The popularity of the belief is perhaps an indication that the depression of the family is accepted, and that the

disintegration of classes is far advanced. This disintegration of classes had already led to an exaggerated estimate of the social importance of the right school and the right college at the right university, as giving a status which formerly pertained to mere birth. In a more articulated society--which is not a society in which social classes are isolated from each other: that is itself a kind of decay--the social distinction of the right school or college would not be so coveted, for social position would be marked in other ways. The envy of those who are 'better born' than oneself is a feeble velleity, with only a shadow of the passion with which material advantages are envied. No sane person can be consumed with bitterness at not having had more exalted ancestors, for that would be to wish to be another person than the person one is: but the advantage of the status conferred by education at a more fashionable school is one which we can readily imagine ourselves as having enjoyed also. The disintegration of class has induced the expansion of envy, which provides ample fuel for the flame of 'equal opportunity'. Besides the motive of giving everyone as much education as possible, because education is in itself desirable, there are other motives affecting educational legislation: motives which may be praiseworthy, or which simply recognise the inevitable, and which we need mention here only as a reminder of the complexity of the legislative problem. One motive, for instance, for raising the age-limit of compulsory schooling, is the laudable desire to protect the adolescent, and fortify him against the more degrading influence to which he is exposed on entering the ranks of industry. We should be candid about such a motive; and instead of affirming what is to be doubted, that everyone will profit by as many years of tuition as we can give him, admit that the conditions of life in modern industrial society are so deplorable, and the moral restraints so weak, that we must prolong the schooling of young people simply because we are at our wits' end to know what to do to save them. Instead of congratulating ourselves on our progress, whenever the school assumes another responsibility hitherto left to parents, we might do better to admit that we have arrived at a stage of civilisation at which the family is irresponsible, or in-competent, or helpless; at which parents cannot be expected to train their children properly; at which many parents cannot afford to feed them properly, and would not

know how, even if they had the means; and that Education must step in and make the best of a bad job. Mr. D. R. Hardman observed that:

The age of industrialism and democracy had brought to an end most of the great cultural traditions of Europe, and not least that of architecture. In the contemporary world, in which the majority were half-educated and many not even a quarter educated, and in which large fortunes and enormous power could be obtained by exploiting ignorance and appetite, there was a vast cultural breakdown which stretched from America to Europe and from Europe to the East.

This is true, though there are a few inferences which might be improperly drawn. The exploitation of ignorance and appetite is not an activity only of commercial adventurers making large fortunes: it can be pursued more thoroughly and on a larger scale by Governments. The cultural break-down is not a kind of infection which began in America, spread to Europe, and from Europe has contaminated the East: (Mr. Hardman may not have meant that, but his words might be so interpreted). But what is important is to remember that 'half-education' is a modern phenomenon. In earlier ages the majority could not be said to have been 'half-educated' or less: people had the education necessary for the functions they were called upon to perform. It would be incorrect to refer to a member of a primitive society, or to a skilled agricultural labourer in any age, as half-educated or quarter-educated or educated to any smaller fraction. Education in the modern sense implies a disintegrated society, in which it has come to be assumed that there must be one measure of education according to which everyone is educated simply more or less. Hence Education has become an abstraction.

Once we have arrived at this abstraction, remote from life, it is easy to proceed to the conclusion---for we all agree about the 'cultural breakdown' that education for everybody is the means we must employ for putting civilisation together again. Now so long as we mean-- by 'education' everything that goes to form the good individual in a good society, we are in accord, though the conclusion does not appear to get us anywhere; but when we come to

mean by 'education' that limited system of instruction which the Ministry of Education controls, or aims to control, the remedy is manifestly and ludicrously inadequate. The same may be said of the definition of the purpose of education which we have already found in "The Churches Survey Their Task." According to this definition, education is the process by which the community attempts to pass on to all its members its culture, including the standards by which it would have them live. The community, in this definition, is an unconscious collective mind, very different from the mind of the Ministry of Education, or the Head Masters' Association, or the mind of any of the numerous bodies concerned with education. If we include as education all the influences of family and environment, we are going far beyond what professional educators can control--though their sway can extend very far indeed; but if we mean that culture is what is passed on by our elementary and secondary schools, or by our preparatory and public schools, then we are asserting that an organ is a whole organism. For the schools can transmit only a part, and they can only transmit this part effectively, if the outside influences, not only of family and environment, but of work and play, of newsprint and spectacles and entertainment and sport, are in harmony with them.

Error creeps in again and again through our tendency to think of culture as group culture exclusively, the culture of the 'cultured' classes and elites. We then proceed to think of the humbler part of society as having culture only in so far as it participates in this superior and more conscious culture. To treat the 'uneducated' mass of the population as we might treat some innocent tribe of savages to whom we are impelled to deliver the true faith, is to encourage them to neglect or despise that culture which they should possess and from which the more conscious part of culture draws vitality; and to aim to make everyone share in the appreciation of the fruits of the more conscious part of culture is to adulterate and cheapen what you give. For it is an essential condition of the preservation of the quality of the culture of the minority, that it should continue to be a minority culture. No number of Young Peoples' Colleges will compensate for the deterioration of Oxford and Cambridge, and for the disappearance of that 'blend' which Dr. Joad relishes. A 'mass-culture' will always be a

substitute-culture and sooner or later the deception will become apparent to the more intelligent of those upon whom this culture has been palmed off.

I am not questioning the usefulness, or deriding the dignity of Young Peoples' Colleges, or of any other particular new construction. In so far as these institutions can be good, they are more likely to be good, and not to deliver disappointment, if we are frankly aware of the limits of what we can do with them, and if we combat the delusion that the maladies of the modern world can be put right by a system of instruction. A measure which is desirable as a palliative, may be injurious if presented as a cure. My main point is the same as that which I tried to make in the previous chapter, when I spoke of the tendency of politics to dominate culture, instead of keeping to its place within a culture. There is also the danger that education--which indeed comes under the influence of politics--will take upon itself the reformation and direction of culture, instead of keeping to its place as one of the activities through which a culture realises itself. Culture cannot altogether be brought to consciousness and the culture of which we are wholly conscious is never the whole of culture: the effective culture is that which is directing the activities of those who are manipulating that which they call culture.

So the instructive point is this, that the more education arrogates to itself the responsibility, the more systematically will it betray culture. The definition of the purpose of education in *The Church Survey Their Task* returns to plague us like the laughter of hyenas at a funeral. *Where that culture is regarded as final, the attempt is made to impose it on younger minds. Where it is viewed as a stage in the development, younger minds are trained to receive it and to improve upon it.* These are cossetting phrases which reprove our cultural ancestors--including those of Greece, Rome, Italy and France--who had no notion of the extent to which their culture was going to be improved upon after the Oxford Conference on Church, Community and State in 1937. We know now that the highest achievements of the past, in art, in wisdom, in holiness, were but 'stages in development' which we can teach our springalds to improve upon. We must not train them merely to receive the culture of the past, for that would be to regard the culture of the past as final. We must not impose culture upon the young, though

we may impose upon them whatever political and social philosophy is in vogue. And yet the culture of Europe has deteriorated visibly within the memory of many who are by no means the oldest among us. And we know, that whether education can foster and improve culture or not, it can surely adulterate and degrade it. For there is no doubt that in our headlong rush to educate everybody, we are lowering our standards, and more and more abandoning the study of those subjects by which the essentials of our culture--of that part of it which is transmissible by education--are transmitted; destroying our ancient edifices to make ready the ground upon which the barbarian nomads of the future will encamp in their mechanised caravans.

The previous paragraph is to be considered only as an incidental flourish to relieve the feelings of the writer and perhaps of a few of his more sympathetic readers. It is no longer possible, as it might have been a hundred years ago, to find consolation in prophetic gloom and such a means of escape would betray the intentions of this essay as stated in the introduction. If the reader goes so far as to agree that the kind of organisation of society which I have indicated is likely to be that most favourable to the growth and survival of a superior culture, he should then consider whether the means are themselves desirable as ends: for I have maintained that we cannot directly set about to create or improve culture--we can only will the means which are favourable to culture, and to do this we must be convinced that these means are themselves socially desirable. And beyond that point, we must proceed to consider how far these conditions of culture are possible, or even, in a particular situation at a particular time, compatible with all the immediate and pressing needs of an emergency. For one thing to avoid is a universalised planning; one thing to ascertain is the limits of the plannable. My enquiry, therefore, has been directed on the meaning of the word culture: so that everyone should at least pause to examine what this word means to him, and what it means to him in each particular context before using it. Even this modest aspiration might, if realised, have consequences in the policy and conduct of our 'cultural' enterprises.