

THE AMERICAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY

VOLUME XLIII

JULY 1937

NUMBER 1

IDEALS IN EDUCATION

ROBERT M. HUTCHINS

ABSTRACT

The character of education is determined by the character of society. The love of money, and the desire for freedom to make it and equality of opportunity to pursue it, are the current ideals of the United States. The consequences of these ideals in American education have been to emphasize vocational education, to base the curriculum on obsolescent knowledge, to omit the consideration of moral questions, and to sacrifice intellectual development in favor of vocational techniques and the acquisition of information. The educational system reconstructed according to the ideal of the common good as determined in the light of reason will have as its primary object the cultivation of the intellectual virtues. Accordingly, general education in the college will center upon the communication of our intellectual tradition and upon training in the intellectual disciplines of grammar, rhetoric, logic, and mathematics. The university, excluding informational and vocational courses, will become an institution where professors and students join in studying fundamental intellectual problems, those of natural science, social science, and metaphysics or philosophy. The graduates of a university so organized and so conducted should after three years of study have some rational conception of the common good and of the methods of achieving it.

The question most often put to me is: "What is wrong with our educational system?" The answer to this question is: "Nothing." The educational system is operated by a million loyal and self-sacrificing individuals who have put on the greatest demonstration of mass education the world has ever seen. I can think of no criticism of them. On the contrary, they deserve the gratitude and support of the people.

The answer to the question asked me may, however, be given in somewhat more general terms. There is never anything wrong with the educational system of a country. What is wrong is the country.

The educational system that any country has will be the system that country wants. It will be, in general, adapted to the needs and ideals of that country as they are interpreted at any given time. In the words of Professor Frank Knight, "Organized education, democratically controlled, is on its face, as regards fundamental ideals, an agency for promoting continuity, or even for accentuating accepted values, not a means by which 'society' can lift itself by its own bootstraps into a different spiritual world." The fundamental proposition which I wish to advance is that whatever is honored in a country will be cultivated there. A means of cultivating it is the educational system.

You may be sure, therefore, that the American educational system will be engaged in the cultivation of whatever is honored in the United States. Its weaknesses will be the weaknesses of American ideals. It may, of course, adopt methods of promoting those ideals that are not always adequate; but mistakes of this temporary kind will shortly be corrected. When experience shows that the people produced by the educational system do not honor what the country honors, ways will be discovered of manufacturing those who will.

What, then, is honored in the United States? I am afraid we must agree that what is principally honored in this country is external goods, and of these principally material goods. Money is the symbol of the things we honor. We talk a good deal about freedom. It seems on analysis to be the freedom to make money. We talk about equality. Under scrutiny it often turns out to be equality of opportunity to make money. Where freedom is not used in this sense, it seems to be used in the sense of anarchy, with the government posing as a policeman to prevent the commission of the major crimes. When we talk about equality in any other sense than equality of opportunity to get rich, we seem to be thinking of equal treatment of unequals, not merely before the law, but also in all the relations of social and intellectual life.

The love of money and the desire for freedom to make it and equality of opportunity to pursue it are, then, the current ideals of the United States. There is nothing new about this in the Anglo-Saxon world. In 1776 Adam Smith proclaimed that these should be the aims of the state. The refrain of Alexander Hamilton in the

Federalist was: "If we mean to be a commercial people . . ." When I was young the winning party's slogan was the full dinner pail. It is only a few years since we used to hear about a chicken in every pot and two cars in every garage. In the last campaign both candidates devoted themselves to explaining how they would improve the economic status of our people if they received the suffrages of their fellow-citizens. I heard few things that indicated that either candidate had much idea what his audience was going to do or ought to do with the money he intended to provide.

If we look at the American democracy, we are struck by the fact that the infinite variety that was the chief characteristic of the democracies of Plato's day is missing from our own. De Tocqueville and Bryce devoted many pages to discussing the uniformity of American life. The democratic man is not as Plato saw him, filled with all desires and all interests. His chief desire and interest is making money. This uniform desire for financial success produces the uniformity that has depressed foreign critics. In general the way to get ahead is to be safe and sound. Exhibitions of originality may make your superiors nervous. So De Tocqueville was finally forced to say: "I know of no country in which there is so little true independence of mind and freedom of discussion as in America." Such modifications as De Tocqueville would now have to make in this statement are the result of changes in other countries rather than our own.

I hope you will understand that, like all university presidents, I have a high opinion of money and am perfectly aware that without an adequate supply and distribution of it no civilization can exist. I am talking about that excessive, overwhelming, and primary urge for material goods that may be said to characterize our society. The discussion of social and political questions in this intellectual environment must revolve around the cost of doing anything about them. The cost of education is a valid objection to it if our people, including the educators, admit that financial success is a test of a good education. If Mr. Roosevelt were going to regard the enrichment of the populace as his aim, he could not object to a discussion of his plans in terms of the outlay involved. The rich can legiti-

mately complain at having their money taken away from them if the sole object of doing so is to make somebody else rich.

The effects of current ideals on the educational system are apparent even on the surface. Freedom in the sense of anarchy pervades the curriculum, our relations with students, and the organization of educational institutions. All professors, all students, and all subjects must be treated equally even though they are unequal. Every course is as important as any other course. All students must be admitted to all levels of the university and may, through the passage of time, achieve at last the rarefied heights of the Ph.D. degree. So the suggestion that not all students are entitled to small-group instruction has been repudiated as undemocratic in more than one university.

Even in the educational system the most important influence is the popular desire for material goods. Teachers and professors are not ordinarily ambitious to get rich. But their students want money; the parents of their students want them taught how to get it, and work that seems to tend in these directions has a better chance of receiving support than work that does not. The result is the somewhat too prevalent notion that the main purpose of education is to help us to make money. This leads to the increasing professionalization of the university and the increasing vocationalization of the public schools. If it is desirable and necessary for the pupil to get as rich as possible, the studies in which he engages should, of course, be framed with that end in view.

It is not enough, according to this theory, to develop the intelligence of the student so that he can cope with the problems of practical life. That kind of thing is too remote from the conditions of the economic struggle. What the pupil must have is some sort of strictly practical, technical training in the routines of a vocation that will enable him to fit into it with a minimum of discomfort to himself and his employer. So the tendency is more and more to drive out of the course of study everything which is not immediately and obviously concerned with making a living. Dr. Alexander Massell, representing the New York State Department of Education, lately told the National Retail Dry Goods Association that the state's educational program might train employees for delicatessen or

butcher shops, depending on the interest the industries show. He said he thought the shoe industry might be the first to win recognition. "We are spreading the good news through New York City," Dr. Massell said, "and those who come first will be first served."

The University of California has just announced a course in what is called cosmetology because what is called the profession of beautician is the fastest growing in the state. The educational materials are supplied by the Beauticians' Association. The University of Wyoming has introduced instruction in dude ranching for a similar reason; and Lehigh University now offers education in news photography.

I may remark at this point that vocational education as we have understood it in this country is one of the cases where the means temporarily chosen by the educational system are not adequate to achieve the end in view. There is little evidence that vocational instruction of a strictly practical, technical, and routine kind is useful in enabling the graduate to fit into the vocation with any degree of success. As a matter of fact, instruction of this sort is likely to unfit him to meet the new and unforeseen problems raised by technology and social change. Rube Goldberg's cartoon of the boy who learned arithmetic for the wrong reason, namely, in order to add figures in a counting house, and who found himself thrown out of work by the adding machine has a present or potential application to almost every gainful occupation. Think of the havoc that may yet be wrought among the stenographers of the nation, carefully trained in the public schools, if the dictaphone becomes the standard method of handling office correspondence. Think of the fate of California's beauticians if self-beautification for ladies becomes as simple a matter as it is for men. Or if this happy day shall not arrive, think what will happen in that great state when so many graduates of the University of California have been educated as beauticians that no one of them can make a living in competition with all the rest.

We hear a good deal today about vocational education in the rural areas. Some people seem to feel that a child in the Georgia countryside should be taught how to make a living there. The figures suggest that the child may never try to make a living in the Georgia

countryside, but may be found not later than age eighteen in Atlanta or New York. The most difficult courses to persuade country boys to enter are those in vocational agriculture. Their instinct is correct, for most of them will not stay on the farm. The mobility of our population means that it is doubtful whether we can hope to frame a course of study designed to make the student successful in any localized economic environment.

Of course young people must be trained in gainful occupations. The question is how. In industry 95 per cent of them are trained on the job. If this is regarded as too haphazard a procedure, an apprenticeship system can be instituted. Part-time arrangements, perhaps like those of the Engineering School at the University of Cincinnati, suggest an intelligent division of responsibility between education and industry. And when a student has actually entered a vocation something can be said for having him return to school for parts of the day or year to acquire further proficiency. This has been done in Minnesota with a series of local vocational agricultural schools. These devices, however, are quite different types of vocational education from those which assume that, beginning in infancy, the school should attempt to give vocational instruction on a full-time basis under its own roof.

Vocational education is receiving new emphasis now because of the changed situation the schools confront. Formerly when a pupil failed industry absorbed him. If he fails now, we must keep him still because he can't get a job. We don't know what to do with him. He can't handle the present course of study, and we can think of nothing else except imitations of vocational activity. But I suggest that the problem here is one of communication, not of content. The standard curriculum still rests on reading. It is probably fair to say that most of the pupils who have failed up to now were pupils who could not read. We have made great progress in developing new methods of teaching reading. Perhaps if the schools used the best methods now available they could communicate with those whom they have been unable to reach so far. Certainly they could materially reduce the number of the functionally illiterate. It is doubtful whether they should rush into a vocational curriculum as an alternative to one that requires reading. The C.C.C. may do a better job,

pending the application of more effective ways of teaching reading, than a vocational course can do. In the meantime we should try to frame a course of study that is good for any pupil and focus our attention on developing the methods of transmitting it to those we cannot teach today.

A second consequence of American ideals in American education is that we have a tendency to base the curriculum on obsolescent information. Ideas, which are, of course, the instruments of knowledge, do not seem particularly productive at first glance. If you can teach a boy how to become a second-rate bookkeeper, you have done something that is gratifying to him and satisfactory to you. To discuss with him the nature of justice, or the theory of the state, or the problem of truth, or the existence of God does not seem to have a very direct bearing on his economic future. If you succeed in modifying your and his financial interests somewhat and say that you are going to fit him into the contemporary world, you and he are likely to feel that the best way to do this is to give him lots of obsolescent information about the contemporary world. This is known as adjusting the young to their environment.

It is important to notice, however, that the environment is symbolic; it is not immediately intelligible. We do not understand it merely by looking at it. It presents itself to us as a mass of confused, unrelated, and incomprehensible items. John Dewey has lately said that the social studies are suffering greatly from what he calls the dead hand of the worship of information that still grips the schools. The only way that we can understand the environment, natural or social, is by using ideas to understand it.

Moreover, if the aim of education is the communication of information, we may as well abandon the enterprise at once; for we shall be forced to the conclusion that Hendrik van Loon announced three months ago. He said: "In the present state of the world the educators might as well admit that there is no stable or valid knowledge that can be communicated to the young generation." Mr. van Loon is right: if knowledge is information about the contemporary scene, we should withdraw from education. I may add that if this is the aim of education our task is hopeless because we can never complete it. Professor William F. Ogburn has pointed out that our informa-

tion is increasing so rapidly that in order to get time to pour it all into the student we shall have to prolong adolescence until at least age forty-five.

A further consequence of American ideals in American education is that moral questions are omitted from it. The end given is money. The issue is how to obtain it as rapidly as possible and stay out of jail. Consideration of other ends and of the means to them is hardly relevant. You can seldom get a law professor to talk about justice, any more than you can get a theological professor to talk about God as man's last end. So Mr. Chesterton remarked that every one of the popular modern phrases or ideals is a dodge to shirk the problem of what is good. Proposals for the wide diffusion of education, he said, merely mean, "We cannot decide what is good, but let us give it to our children." The result of this temper is not an immoral but an unmoral generation. It is not immoral because it has seldom heard of moral questions.

A further consequence of American ideals in American education is that intellectual development is sacrificed to that practice in vocational techniques and that acquisition of information to which I have referred. The intellectual tradition in which we live receives merely incidental attention. There is no particular reason for talking about intellectual development if what you are concerned with is financial success, for there is little evidence of any correlation between the two. I do not deny that the law schools have manufactured some very crafty fellows and that the engineering schools have graduated some smart mechanics. I do deny that either the public schools or the universities are devoting themselves to producing people who have had genuine intellectual discipline and who have acquired those intellectual habits which the ancients properly denominated virtues.

The loss of our intellectual tradition is just as important as the loss of the intellectual virtues, and the two are, of course, related. What seems to be overlooked is that we have an intellectual tradition and that we are living in it today whether we know it or not and whether we like it or not. This tradition is what Mr. Butler of Columbia has called our "common intellectual denominator." Describing the results of omitting it from education he says:

The youth thus deprived of the privilege of real instruction and real discipline is sent into the world bereft of his great intellectual and moral inheritance. His own share of the world's intellectual and moral wealth has been withheld from him. It is no wonder that the best use he can so often find to make of his time is to try, by whatever means he can devise, to share the material wealth of some of his fellows.

The striking fact of modern life is not the novelty of our problems but their antiquity. As Bertrand Russell has said, "Men of the past were often parochial in space, but the dominant men of our age are parochial in time. They feel for the past a contempt that it does not deserve, and for the present a respect that it deserves still less." If we assume that the object of education is to enable the student to cope with contemporary problems, we must familiarize him with the intellectual tradition in which he lives. Plato, for example, discusses almost every question that agitates our society from nudism to communism. You can even find in the *Republic* remarks about the difficulties of getting the rich to pay taxes, and Aristotle has some interesting observations on the life tenure of the Spartan Supreme Court. The ideas that are found in the books of great writers through the ages may be important in understanding the environment today.

In case you think these are merely the words of an old reactionary, I beg to report that on August 8 in the great newspaper of Soviet Russia, *Pravda*, appeared the following:

[We condemn] those vulgar sociologists who try to reduce the content and significance of writers to a classification of the social origins and leanings of the author. . . . The great artists of the past belong to the working people. These great artists are alive for us. Their works have not been in vain; their best works have stirred the minds of the people and have emancipated them. The classics, which are warm with the breath of life and the beat of the human heart, can help our youth understand not only the past, but also the present.

In addition to knowing what men have thought, we must know the learned techniques that have developed through the ages for understanding and expressing thought. These are techniques that we are practicing all the time, whether we know it or not. If we practice them badly, it may be because we have not been well trained in using them. If you can't understand me now, it may be because you had no proper education in grammar, or because I had no

proper education in rhetoric, or both. In my time, at least, no proper education in these subjects has been given.

If the question is, then, what is wrong with the educational system? the answer is still: "Nothing." If the question is what can be done about what is wrong with American society, the answer is very difficult. Education provides the great peaceful means of improving society; and yet, as we have seen, the character of education is determined by the character of society. In the United States, even if we were to assume that education could be better than society, it is hard to see how education alone could effect any substantial change. The reason for this is the competition of the newspapers, the radio, the movies, and the home. The total influences outside the school are as strong as they ever were, no matter how some of them may have been weakened as against some of the others. If we could construct an ideal educational system, it might have little effect on the tone of American life unless we could change the tone of these other agencies at the same time. Still we must not assume a defeatist attitude. The alternative to a spiritual revolution is a political revolution. I rather prefer the former. The only way to secure a spiritual revolution is through education. We must therefore attempt the reconstruction of the educational system, even if the attempt seems unrealistic or even silly.

We must first determine what ideals we wish to propose for our country. I would remind you that what is honored in a country will be cultivated there. I suggest that the ideal that we should propose for the United States is the common good as determined in the light of reason. If we set this ideal before us, what are the consequences to the educational system? It is clear that the cultivation of the intellect becomes the first duty of the system. And the question, then, is how can the system go about its task? The only way in which the ideal proposed could ever be accepted by our fellow-citizens and by the educational system would be by the gradual infiltration of this notion throughout the country. This can be accomplished only by beginning. If one college and one university—and only one—are willing to take a position contrary to the prevailing American ideology, and suffer the consequences, then conceivably, over a long period of time, the character of our civilization may change.

I am asking you to think, therefore, what one college and one university might do to establish for the country and the educational system the ideal of the common good as determined in the light of reason. I suggest again that the primary object of institutions with this aim will be the cultivation of the intellectual virtues. I suggest that the cultivation of the intellectual virtues can be accomplished through the communication of our intellectual tradition and through training in the intellectual disciplines. This means understanding the great thinkers of the past and present, scientific, historical, and philosophical. It means a grasp of the disciplines of grammar, rhetoric, logic, and mathematics. It does not, of course, mean the exclusion of contemporary materials. They should be brought in daily to illustrate, confirm, or deny the ideas held by the writers under discussion. Topics of current interest are topics with which great books deal. These books have the advantage of dealing with topics that are always of current interest. Nor is such a program a bleak, barren, arid course of study excluding literature and the fine arts. They constitute an important part of our intellectual heritage and hence an important part of the curriculum.

Such a course of study is, in the modern jargon, relevant to experience. It has the additional distinction, which one based on the daily newspaper does not have, of introducing the student to the great thinkers of every age and to the great artists, of developing habits of reading, and of assisting in the formulation of critical standards. If there are few new problems, if all the current information that is needed can be taught in this way, and if ideas are instruments of knowledge, then such a course of study is more relevant to experience than some based on direct familiarity with the current scene.

As Professor Whitehead has said, "Fundamental progress can be made only through the reinterpretation of basic ideas." This curriculum makes fundamental rather than superficial progress possible.

The course of study that I have described so far is one to which all students, when they have learned to read, should be exposed. Those students who demonstrate in this period of general education that they have the intellectual qualifications for advanced work should be permitted to go on to the university, which I think of as beginning

at about the beginning of the present junior year. Those students who have not distinguished themselves or who do not wish to go on should be encouraged to betake themselves to practical life. This is the actual situation in every country of the world but this. In England, for example, not more than 40 per cent of the graduates of the great public schools proceed to the university. The reason is that what establishes a boy's social position in England is attendance at a public school, which he leaves, ordinarily, at about the end of our sophomore year. Graduation from a university adds nothing to his acceptability. It is the old school tie that counts. In this country the moral equivalent of the old school tie is the Bachelor's degree. Among other reasons I am in favor of awarding that degree at the end of the period of general education, that is, at about the end of the sophomore year, in the hope that those students who have hitherto gone to college merely to confirm or acquire a social position will be induced to withdraw on receiving the document they came for.

In a university, therefore, we should have students interested in study and prepared for it. If the ideal of the country and of the educational system is the common good as determined in the light of reason, vocational instruction will disappear from the university. Courses designed solely to transmit information about current affairs will disappear as well. Such research as merely counting telephone poles will also vanish. Professors whose only interest is in dealing with immediate practical questions will vanish too. These excisions would leave us with a group of professors studying fundamental intellectual problems with students equipped to face them.

These problems fall naturally into three rough classifications: natural science, social science, and metaphysics, or philosophy. Metaphysics is a bad word. A fortune teller near the University of Chicago had a sign in her window, "Licensed metaphysician." When people think of metaphysics they think of it, under the influence of the 19th Century Germans, as something vague, meaningless, abstruse, and gaseous. The word "philosophy" is hardly better off. What I mean by calling one of the faculties of the ideal university the faculty of metaphysics or philosophy is merely that it is the faculty concerned with those fundamental theoretical problems which are common to all fields.

These fields are divided in two ways: by reference to method on the one hand and to distinctions of subject matter on the other. In terms of method we distinguish between those bodies of knowledge which are developed by processes of analysis and reflection about the common experiences of men, and those bodies of knowledge which depend upon special processes of research and investigation for the data they analyze. In both cases knowledge is based upon experience and develops from experience by reflection. The difference is in the method by which the experience is obtained. In the case of philosophy it is obtained naturally in the course of the ordinary operations of the senses. In the case of science it is obtained under the special controls and conditions of directed observation in specially planned investigations. In this sense knowledge which is distinguished by the specialized character of its data, obtained by deliberate researches, is scientific. Knowledge based on common experience is philosophical.

In terms of subject matter we can make subordinate distinctions within the fields of science and philosophy. The sciences divide into the natural and the social, according as their subject matter is the world of physical things in change or is the world of society and human relations. Philosophy may also be divided according as it is concerned with the natural world, with man and the social world, with man's artistic productions, or with being itself, the principles and causes of whatever is. Thus we have the philosophy of nature, the philosophy of art, or aesthetics, ethics and politics, and metaphysics.

The philosophy of nature treats of the principles common to all the natural sciences, ethics and politics of the principles which must be employed in dealing with practical problems, aesthetics of the principles of artistic production, and metaphysics of the first principles, principles of such generality that they underlie all human knowledge. For the purposes of this discussion I am willing to apply to metaphysics Huxley's definition of philosophy. He says:

What is commonly called science, whether mathematical, physical, or biological, consists of the answers which mankind have been able to give to the inquiry, What do I know? They furnish us with the results of the mental opera-

tions which constitute thinking; while philosophy, in the stricter sense of the term, inquires into the foundation of the first principles which those operations assume or imply.

Whether we limit philosophy to metaphysics, as Huxley does, or whether we expand metaphysics to be practically synonymous with philosophy in the common use of the word, it is clear that the knowledge we are attempting to name is concerned with principles relevant to the theoretical interpretation and practical use of the facts and laws of the natural and social sciences. The fields of human learning are thus not only comprehended but also ordered to one another in the organization of the university into the three faculties of natural science, social science, and metaphysics or philosophy.

As a matter of fact, everybody has a metaphysics or philosophy. In most of us it is an attitude, emotional and unreasoned, about important questions. It is impossible to live without a metaphysics. The fact that we do not know that we have one or do not like to be told we have one is immaterial. We have one. I suggest that it is a most important function of a university in a country that is to be devoted to the common good as determined by reason to make the metaphysics of the citizens as rational and intelligent as possible.

The consideration of first principles in a university might make these principles explicit. It might make the professors and students conscious of them. It might make them aware that these principles are ordering and clarifying. It would make them see that these principles, like all knowledge, are derived from experience. In the words of Thomas Aquinas, "The human intellect is measured by things, so that a human concept is not true by reason of itself, but by reason of its being consonant with things, since *an opinion is true or false according as it answers to the reality.*" These principles, then, are refinements of common sense. They are methods of understanding and interpreting the symbols through which we know the environment. They are the basic ideas by the reinterpretation of which Mr. Whitehead believes fundamental progress may be made.

The graduates of a university so organized and so conducted should after three years of study have some rational conception of the common good and of the methods of achieving it. They might have learned how to use their heads. They might understand how to

use them on the problems of the contemporary world. They might have established moral as well as intellectual standards. Their moral standards might endure because they would be based on reason and not on authority and precept alone. They would be aware of the intellectual tradition they had inherited. They should be consciously equipped with the intellectual instruments which we now unconsciously employ. They might be ready to take their place in a community devoted to the achievement of the common good through reason.

But we know that the United States is not a country devoted to the achievement of the common good through reason. We know that we are a people devoted to the acquisition of material goods by any means not too outrageous. What will be the fate, then, of our graduates? They will be, in my opinion, as well equipped for financial success as our graduates are today. But they may not want it; and they should be quite unwilling to use some popular methods of attaining it.

I am afraid, therefore, that I am proposing some notable sacrifices on the altar of reform. The first few generations of graduates of my educational system might suffer the same fate as the martyrs of the early church. They might be that phenomenon horrible to American eyes, failures. Yet it is possible that if the one college and the one university for which I hope could persevere, the blood of martyrs might prove to be the seed of an enlightened nation. Like the early church this ideal college and this ideal university might gain strength, power, and influence. They might slowly alter the aspirations of our people. They might become a light to this country, and through it to the world.

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO