Intellect, Character, and Values In Higher Education

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THE news this year has given currency to the thought that the modern university is a sort of factory. While this is no doubt a caricature, it has the provocative bite of a good caricature, and it is both a more precise and more complete characterization than the somewhat older metaphor that likened the large public university to a supermarket. (Lest you think that I, from a "private" institution, am making an invidious distinction in referring to "public" universities, I want to make it clear that for my purposes, **all** large universities are public. They are sustained by the public and the public agencies that they serve. Last year thirty-two per cent of the operating budget of my "private" university came directly from the federal government.)

At any rate, the supermarket image conveys only the point that the public can find what it wants there. The factory metaphor goes futher, saying that what are to be found are products turned out on the premises and that, as products, they are instruments for society to use as it wishes. These products are of two main kinds: useful knowledge or "research" and people with marketable skills, especially the avidly sought-after skills that produce more useful knowledge. And so we see more and more references to the "knowledge industry" and to its managers, promoters, and operators.

Universities, the founders of this industry, may be at some disadvantage as compared to the new second generation of research establishments because universities still have undergraduate students. Undergraduates are not immediately useful to the enterprise because they are too close to the raw state to be very marketable, or very helpful in producing research. They even interfere with it. They are, however, a source of income that can be invested in the production of research and research skills. Many institutions prefer to procure students who are already semi-finished and give them a final processing. In either case, students are used as one kind of material, more or less raw as the case may be.

However, students can use the factory for their purposes too, even as they are used themselves. They look to it as a source of marketable skills and the no less marketable credits and certificates, not always redeemable at par, without which the system would break down.

As a factory produces utilities, the factory image of the university focuses attention on the product and its use. It is not surprising that the view of the university that is most readily suggested by the use of this metaphor is that the university exists to serve the established institutions of society, the industrial, political-military complex that is called The Establishment for short. And no doubt the university does and must serve it in some fashion, although students for their part resent being used without their express permission. Excessive servility to The Establishment is doubtless a fault, but it is probably not as dangerous a fault as the tendency for a university to think of itself, as it sometimes does, primarily as a factory, a producer of utilities.

The reason why this is dangerous, I think, touches on a point of some gen-

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erality and significance. This is that an activity that has to justify itself entirely by the value of its product is inherently servile, while all products — things separable from the activity that produces them — are in turn valuable only for the sake of something else, not for themselves.

It was the Greeks who first distinguished the "liberal" from the "servile" skills and activities, and the interest that the distinction has for us has nothing to do with the fact that the Greeks, who owned slaves, had a different social system than we do. The servile occupations, as I have said, are those whose value depends entirely on what they produce, an end-product that has a tangible existence apart from the activity that produces it. Nobody, for example, would want to sweat and strain to dig a hole unless the result was to make something, like a well with water or oil at the bottom of it, or unless he expected to find some gold or other treasure that would be his. And if we could have the well and its oil, or the gold, without all the sweat and strain — say by rubbing an Aladdin's lamp — I am sure we would quickly settle for that. Since the point of the digging would be what it produced, we wouldn't dig if we could get the result in some easier way. That's simple economic rationality. But in that case we would engage in digging only under the pressure of necessity; it is the sort of labor a man would hire someone else to do if he could afford it. That is what it means to say that it is a "servile" activity — nobody would do it if he didn't have to.

Now it is sometimes said — carelessly — that all we ever do (at least if we are rational) is done for the sake of some distinguishable "value" it produces, a pay-off. That would make all intelligent activity a form of "labor," a servile process of producing utilities. But if that were true, as we can easily see it is not, the most pleasing and natural of human conditions would be lying flat on our backs: we should never move except for some desirable product or reward. This is rather like the ancient opinion that the natural condition of all bodies is a state of rest, so that only motion needs explaining by a "cause". Galileo and his contemporaries discovered that motion was as "natural" as rest; and we all know, when we think about it, that activity is even more natural to people than inactivity. Living, for us, means doing something; and solitary confinement in a dark and padded sell, with a soft bed and complete soundproofing, drives a man crazy sooner than almost anything else. Indeed it is this so-called "deprivation of activity and stimuli" that is one of the chief obstacles to travel in interplanetary rockets.

The point of all this, of course, is that we do some things just because it is the doing that we enjoy. Some of them also have tangible products. When we go fishing, we sometimes catch something; but we usually enjoy a day's fishing even when we don't catch much. Nobody who likes fishing would accept, or even understand, an offer of the pleasure without the activity of fishing. It is the fishing he values, not something that fishing produces. For him, fishing is not a servile but a "free" activity. The free occupations are those that have their value in the activity itself, because they are what a free man would choose to do even if he had all the things or products—in short, the equipment—that he needed or could use.

One reason that I have chosen fishing as an example is that it can be either servile or free, depending on how one takes it. Some people catch fish for a living; sometimes they hate it, doing it only through necessity. Others fish for sport. The sportsman looks upon his catch chiefly as a sign of his skill. After he has had his picture taken, he is as likely as not to give his fish to his friends, saving one to eat rather as a ritual object — the way a savage eats his conquered adversary. The lesson of this is that life can be one long series of servile chores under the pressure of necessity; and when it is not it is be-

cause we have learned to regard, for example, "the coat and suit game" as a way of life — a game indeed — and not just a way of making a living. This is how our occupations become liberalized to the degree that they can be, although some ways of life lend themselves to it better than others, affording opportunities to engage our interests, perfect our powers, and both test and display our excellence. When we think of a university as a factory whose value is measured by its products we thereby regard its activities as subservient, servile. They do not engage us for their own sakes, nor do we invest ourselves in them. This applies equally to us professors, turning out our research and using it in our rise up the academic hierarchy, and to students who use the university to acquire skills and diplomas that they can exploit in advancing their own careers. This both subverts the idea of a university and debases its values.

My second main point is that when an activity is valued only for its product, for something distinct from the activity that produces it, the product too is an external "thing," useful in relation to something else but not valuable without qualification. Just about everything that is valuable in itself it not a "thing" at all but something we do. This is true even of the rather mundane enjoyments the poet had in mind when he wrote of

> A loaf of bread, a jug of wine, and thou
> Singing in the wilderness . . .
> Ah, wilderness were paradise enow!

He wants the bread, the wine, and the girl, all right. But as mere possessions they have little value. They are, as we say, "useless" unless we use them, incorporate them in something we do: the bread for eating, the wine for drinking, and the damsel for dandling on the knee and other forms of "interpersonal relations." But these, the real objects of enjoyment, are all activities that we value for themselves. The trouble with eating and drinking and the more elemental pleasures of the lady's company is not that they aren't delightful, while they last, but that they quickly exhaust themselves. When you have eaten all you can hold, eating is no longer much fun. The traditional way of explaining this is to say that these activities are still infected with necessity: they are associated with needs that have to be met; and when the needs are satisfied, the activities cease to be satisfying.

"Things," then, are of no great value until we can incorporate them in the activities that make up our lives and give the life of each of us its unique quality. It is our activities that have value in themselves, if anything within our reach has intrinsic value, the most continuous and absorbing of enjoyments being our delight in the activities that most absorb us and are most continuously available. Some of them have the further advantage of being sharable — bridging the gulf between person and person as nothing else can. We can sing and talk together, go fishing and talk philosophy in company. "Any number can play," as the saying goes, so that my enjoyment of these things need not be purchased at the expense of your deprivation. In sum, the values a man realizes in his life are a function of the objects and activities with which he occupies himself, and they are usually better if he has friends to share them with, for enjoyment is enhanced by being reflected back in mutual resonance.

Now it just happens that a university is a place where, if we but take advantage of them, the civilizing occupations of the free are most available, from the pleasures of discovery and understanding through those of making music and poems and on to sport, love, and fraternity. The idea of a university is . . . what? The idea of a knowledge and public utility factory? Or the idea of the modern equivalent of the games at Olympia, where we find opportunities to develop and test our powers of mind and body in the spirit of amateur sport. It all depends on the purposes which

the whole vast mechanism is being used to serve.

You may think that I have wandered far from the general theme of this series," Value Formation in the University," and from my announced subject, which is "Intellect, Character, and Value in Higher Education." But I do not believe I have. There has been a certain wringing of hands among educators because of studies tending to show that colleges and universities have little effect on their students' values. Philip Jacob's book, **Changing Values in College,** started much of the soul-searching by concluding that there was very little changing of values in college. What I have been trying to do has been to construct a hypothesis that would account for this phenomenon and suggest what we might do about it.

Let me begin to tie my introduction to our general theme by telling you about a student who flunked out of one of our very best colleges at the end of his sophomore year. Here is part of his own account of what happened:

> Freshman year I had the usual problems of adjustment and of learning how to study, but it was not for that reason that I had only average grades that year. I had noticed how many of my classmates would study and know their subjects, but never really apply what they learned to themselves or think out the implications of the knowledge they had gathered. **They and their studies were separate entities.** Such a course of action is beneficial in the sense that it produces no anxiety, enables one to have time for the accumulation of more facts, and thus enhances one's chances of doing well on examinations. But it is quite the contrary if one wishes to be an educated human being and not a robot.

This poor fellow was able to suppress his quest for education sufficiently to get good grades during the first semester of his sophomore year, but then he collapsed. As he describes its,

> I was constantly asking myself why I should accept this and not that, found no answers that satisfied me, and could not concentrate on my routine assignments. I would lie awake at night, doze off toward daybreak, sleep through the majority of my classes, and wake up worried and plagued by guilt.

This boy's encounter with his university was not exactly a success, but I would argue that his classmates, who kept their studies at a safe distance from their lives and values, had never even matriculated in spirit, and that the university was at least as much a waste for them as for the poor flunker.

The key to this story, for our purposes, is our hero's remark that for his colleagues, "They and their studies were separate entities." They had come to acquire some of the products of the knowledge factory. Study was something of a chore, justified by its payoff in the light of the purposes and values they had brought with them. Their engagement with the higher learning was minimal.

A companion story, I should imagine, could be told about one of our hero's professors, who regarded himself and his teaching as separate entities, and who saw this as beneficial in the sense that it produced no anxiety, gave him time to concentrate on the production of research, and thus enhanced his chances of rising in his profession.

If my suspicions are correct, it is the habit of looking at a university as a mechanism for the production and acquisition of the useful that accounts for the ability of student and teacher alike to keep his inner self, his values, disengaged from what goes on in the top of his mind when he occupies it with the knowledge that is retailed on our campuses. The useful is there to be exploited, for ends already given and therefore unconnected with the transaction. Hence values are not affected. As one might expect, this sequence is self-regenerating, for the man whose values are unquestioned sees what is around him as useful or threatening to himself and his purposes.

Unless we think this is the way things should be, this closed regenerative circuit must be broken. We are living at a time, I think, when our students my be ready to help us. It is perfectly true, as I have said, that students too regard the university as a "factory" or "machine" and that they exploit it with a good deal of cynicism. Indeed, it is student groups that have picked up and spread the machine metaphor. I suspect that this may be one reason why many students seem relatively unconcerned about cheating for the sake of grades — another topic that has been much in the news. After all, "cheating" a slot machine isn't really cheating. The mechanism works in mysterious and irrational ways, so why not try to make it pay off in negotiable coinage? A machine doesn't have a soul, and to the degree that a university is like a machine, it has no soul either.

While students will gladly expoit the academic machine like the rest of us, they often disdain the values of The Establishment that it serves and that seems ready enough to exploit them in turn. And they are fed to the teeth with its phoniness. The undergraduate courses taught by that **demi-mondain** of academia, the teaching assistant. with its regurgitating quizzes, is "mickey-mouse." So is the conventional system of extra-curricular rituals and its make-believe hierarchy of places and honors. The student disaffection of the 1960's, unless I am mistaken, expresses a demand for the authentic — for something that is "for real." What is for real is what can engage you, not just on the top of your mind, but "all the way up," as Ernest Hemingway put it when he wrote that the only people who live their lives all the way up are bullfighters. This is why so many have turned to the civil rights movement and are even now in Mississippi, where the issues are for real. There they hope to leave the mickeymouse forever behind them.

Sometimes we ancients have to smile at what we see but I hope we smile with sympathy. Only recently one of our students came back from Mississippi to report on the realities he found there. No, he did not plan to come back to school; he was hooked. What, then, did he plan to do with his life? "I want to be an agitator." For what? "Freedom." But beyond the removal of immediate and obvious injustices, he could give no content to his idea of freedom. I was reminded of the young John Stuart Mill, who one day asked himself what there would be to live for if the injustices his generation was bent on removing were by some miracle to disappear. He had no idea. His encounter with nothingness cost him a nervous breakdown, for he, like the radicals of 1965, had never taken thought about what would be worth doing if most men were free to do what is worth while for its own sake — whatever that might be.

It is here that the insurrectionists at Berkeley, for all their wildness, suggest a point at which the rest of us may be able to exert some leverage. For some of the members of the FSM have rediscovered possibilities of authenticity in the university itself. My spies send me a flow of materials from Berkeley, much of it mimeographed flyers put out by the embattled students. Now that the public turmoil has died away and the activists are no longer threatening to lay their bodies on the machine and bring it to a stop, the flow of communications has continued. Letters circulate briskly among revolutionary committees of correspondence that are vibrant with life. It is a little hard for an outsider to be sure what the excitement is really about, but I have some clues. "Although the immediate issue of our struggle was political freedom," says one letter, "the underlying problem is solidarity." Now they feel they have it, that they have reestablished a community where all human sharing of values had broken down. "We must not allow the new lines of communication between us to be broken," says another, describing contacts between fac-

ulty and students, between teaching assistants and both other groups, that had never before existed. Throughout there is the most unabashed use of words that would have been impossible a short while ago in a sophisticated town, words like "brotherhood" and even "love," as they try to describe what they regard as a true university in the process of being reborn. And even more than the words, the tone is one of rejoicing that the machine has regained its soul, the soul of a university rededicated to the high purposes of education. One is tempted to think of the underground network of Christians worshipping the true God while official Rome was losing its sense of direction.

However fleeting, and even adolescent. this burst of enthusiasm may turn out to be, the rediscovery of authentic values in the university is a precious opportunity. What is needed at Berkeley and elsewhere is a follow-up that can redeem the promise of this fervor, replacing the mickeymouse with activities to which a student can devote himself — the activities that are proper to a university, where excellence in intellect, character, and value can be realized and exhibited together with some zest.

There is, to be sure, a great deal of cant about excellence these days, a term so stylish that, as with most catchwords, it is fast fading into phoniness, losing what precision of meaning it might have had. In contrast, "virtue" is a word that is almost never used, not even for what a woman used to be said to lose. The ancient question, Can virtue be taught? is never heard outside the classroom; while in class it is seldom taken seriously as a question, but is treated as one of the stock gambits that Socrates used in playing the game of dialectical one-upmanship.

Virtue, however, just means excellence, and excellence is the current word for virtue. So both the recent palaver about excellence and the occasional exercises of the classroom take on a fresh significance when we realize that our question about engendering excellence is simply the old one about whether, and in what sense, virtue can be taught.

The question can be made specific if we remember that virtue, or human excellence, has traditionally been recognized in two main forms, called intellectual and moral — that is, excellence in thought and judgment and excellence in character and action. The test of both is performance, and both are, and are concerned with, values.

Let us assume, then, that the purpose of liberal education is excellence, comprising the virtues of thought and character as expressed in what a person chooses to do with his time and with his life. The principal business of a liberal college or university would then be the cultivation of the intellectual virtues, as my former boss President Hutchins used to say in his perversely old-fashioned language. This is the kind of job that such an institution can do best, and it is one that no other kind of institution can do as well. The fulfillment of the intellect is not achieved by pumping students full of knowledge, but by providing them with the equipment and opportunities for using their intelligence to solve intellectual problems, which may be scientific problems and also problems about policy and the making of the works of the mind. No one can encounter the problems of science, art, and practice in this active sort of way without realizing the emotional rewards and moral exactions of intellectual activity.

Other aspects of character-building and the excellence of character, on the other hand, seem to be the business of everybody in general and of nobody in particular. Universities have no patent on them, for a person's character is being formed all the time, whether he is in college or out. But because everything we do with any regularity affects our characters, the fifth of his life that a fresh young graduate has spent in college will inevitably have had a profound effect on him. "Yale, mother of

men," is perhaps an exaggeration, but it has some point. What are the powers of a university for "making men"?

The principle that applies here is simple, but its ramifications are complex: since it is what we do that gives our lives their special quality and flavor, and since we come to act in our characteristic ways by doing things of those particular sorts, the key to character and performance is getting accustomed to living according to a certain pattern and style. If you act like a bum or an educated man long enough, the chances are good that you will have become a bum or an educated man and be stuck with one role or the other. (Short experimental forays into Lower Slobbovia or Highbrow Heights are quite a different thing.) And since most of the time that a student spends in the university community is **not** passed in classes and laboratories, what the institution does about these other aspects of his life can be very important indeed.

Important, but not subject to direct control. It is a plain fact of human life that a preconceived pattern cannot be imposed upon human society. People will have their own ideas. Institutions are not made according to a blue-print, but rather grow by their own vitality in directions that are more or less influenced by deliberate policy and external conditions. This is especially true of the free institutions in which excellence of all varieties flourishes best. Or, to put it as it applies to individuals, it is what we do rather than what is done **to** us that markes the essential difference; and of course what we do is considerably affected by the opportunities and obstacles that we encounter.

This autonomy of intelligence is the key to all aspects of higher education. The ability to reproduce a scientific argument or proof from memory, letter-perfect in every detail, may earn a high grade but proves nothing about one's understanding. For that one has to be able to construct the argument in one's own words rather than the words of one's master, and to discuss alternatives, developing the consequences of different assumptions. And the development of character is not achieved by prescribing in detail what is to be done but by providing limits within which those of less experience can make their own decisions. Such limits need not always be in the form of rules laid down, but may lie in the various external conditions under which students can educate themselves, not the least of which are the circumstances in which students have to live. In one of Winston Churchill's most famous speeches he remarked that while "we shape our houses, our houses in turn shape us." A fakir can overcome the limitations of his pad by years of self-discipline. but it is true on the whole that plumbing and cheap soap have done a lot for culture. So does the presence of a common-room, a library, and a pleasant dining room where like-minded people can be found.

I should conclude, then, that a public university must take responsibility for shaping the character and values, as well as the intellects of its students, for unless it does the former, it will not succeed in the latter. It cannot avoid doing so, whether it has the courage to do it consciously and the intelligence to do it wisely or not. To make no choices about such matters is to have made a decision with grave consequences; and a knowledge factory that allows a student and his studies to remain "separate entities" has thereby left him with a vacuum, intellectual as well as moral, that either he or the devil will surely find ways to fill.