

SOME TASKS FOR EDUCATION

By

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PREFACE

How often have men stood on the verge of the promised land and seen, near and tantalizing, the country of their dreams, only to be driven back again to the thirst and hunger of the wilderness! How often have they entered it for a brief period and then lost it by their follies and crimes! Shall we be more fortunate? How can we make ourselves more fortunate?

The following lectures are intended to be a small contribution to these questions—to raise them and to suggest partial answers. They were delivered in September 1945 at the University of Toronto: the first three on the Burwash Foundation at Victoria University, the last as the Sir Robert Falconer Memorial Lecture. The first and second lectures, somewhat abbreviated, have appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Though not consecutive, all deal with aspects of a single problem—how to improve ourselves and our society by education. The first lecture raises questions about the education required to prepare us to live in the modern world, and calls attention to necessary equipment which is often overlooked. The second discusses our neglect of character training and suggests some steps that we might take about it. The third deals with the problem of creating a civilized democracy and compares the education of Greek democracy with our own. The fourth asks how men

can be trained in the virtues of candour and impartiality.

I cannot close this preface without an expression of warm thanks to the generous hosts and friendly audiences that made my visit to Canada delightful both at the time and in memory.

R. W. L.

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SOME TASKS FOR EDUCATION

I. EDUCATION FOR THE MODERN WORLD

Though everybody nowadays seems to know the *x y z* of everything nobody knows the *a b c* of anything.

BERNARD SHAW

I WILL start from some familiar phrases. "We need a modern education for a modern world." "We have to prepare our youth to live in contemporary society and face its problems." Such sayings, at first hearing, put heart into us. Their blunt commonsense immediately commends itself, and they seem to point straight to the curriculum we need. And then come second thoughts. Certainly we must educate our youth to face the problems of the day. But what precisely are they, and which are the most important? Certainly we should have a modern education for a modern world, but what is the exact meaning of "modern"? In what sense is our world modern, that is, different from the world of a thousand or two thousand years ago? If uttered without much thought, as they often are, these plausible phrases may be only lullabies to put a problem to sleep.

In the last eighteen months I had two letters which threw some light on the questions asked in the last paragraph. One was from a professor of pathology, who in late life had been reading Plato in translation. "I am still reading Plato," he wrote. "It is remarkable to meet the vague ideas that knock about one's head succinctly stated, and that at a date about two and a

half millennia ago; not to mention all the other things of which one has never thought at all." The other letter was from an old school friend who wrote about his son in Burma, since killed. He says: "I remember Jim telling me in one of his letters how, when not actually engaged in fighting he would sit in his dug-out and read Plato by the light of an improvised oil lamp. In another he spoke of always reading before going into action, these two passages from Plato's *Apology*:¹ 'A man who is good for anything ought not to calculate the chance of living and dying; he ought only to consider whether in doing anything he is doing right or wrong—acting the part of a good man or a bad.' And, 'Whatever a man's place, whether he has chosen it himself or been placed there by his commander, there he should remain in the hour of danger—he should not think of death or of anything but disgrace.'" Strange and significant—these lights, lit so long ago, burning undimmed in the Burmese jungle and in the face of death! Human nature changes little: otherwise Dante and Shakespeare would have ceased to have meaning for us. Human ideals change little: the Jews thought that the aim of man should be to do the will of God, the Greeks thought that it should be to achieve the excellence of human nature. After two thousand years we have not got beyond these ideals. Techniques of study may alter and new techniques need to be learnt, but the more important and deeper things do not alter; the sense of wonder in which the pursuit of know-

¹ 28.

ledge begins, the ardour and persistence in it that no difficulty discourages, the power of seeing the world as it is, of distinguishing the important from the unimportant, of knowing when a thing is proved and when it is not, still give science its power and meaning, as in the days when Ionian thinkers first set sail on its unknown sea, or when Socrates "discussed human life, the meaning of religion and irreligion, beauty and ugliness, justice and injustice, reason and unreason, the state and the citizen, government and the capacity for it, and those other subjects, knowledge of which marks the true man."¹ Because of these constants in humanity, the deeper human problems remain the same.

Clearly we must be careful about the word modern, which has two different meanings. It may mean contemporary in time; in this sense Plato and Epicurus, Shakespeare and Montaigne are not modern; it may mean contemporary in spirit: in this sense, they are—Plato and Epicurus perhaps more modern than Shakespeare and Montaigne. Modernity is a question not of date but of outlook.

After these cautionary remarks about the use of the word modern, let us consider what education is needed to prepare us for the contemporary world. Here it is essential to be clear what the problems of the modern world are and which are the most important. Superficially they seem to fall under two main heads. On the one hand are the social problems of our complex civilization—its trade and commerce and economics,

¹ Xenophen, *Mem.* 1.1.16.

its local and central government, its foreign contacts and international relations; on the other hand is the vast field of science and applied science. It would seem that our education should equip us to deal with these two sets of problems, that its two main departments should be the social sciences and the natural sciences. Such an education would, it appears, cover the main needs of the modern world. Is this so, and would such an education be adequate?

First consider what, for want of a better phrase, I shall call an education based on the social sciences. "It would be well," says a recent book on the curriculum, "if teachers made a conscious effort, both by the selection of material included in their courses and by their manner of handling it, to make clear to their pupils how a modern society is run and organized. All our citizens should have some knowledge of the ways in which natural forces are harnessed, materials transformed, goods manufactured and distributed, public services organized, paid for and controlled, the City and the State governed. They should, to some extent, understand what forces are at work changing and shaping our economic life and our social customs".¹ Here surely is a modern education for the modern world. Is not this what we want?

I do not feel so confident. I may be unduly sceptical in thinking that, except in the hands of those rare teachers who can make any subject attractive, the average pupil would be bored by studying the organization of a world which he has not yet really entered,

¹ *The Content of Education* p. 32.

with which he has had very superficial contacts. There are, however, other criticisms to be made on such a curriculum. It is in itself a large order, but it omits still more than it includes; nothing is said of religion, languages, art, music; even science, literature and history are ignored, except in so far as they might be incidental to the subjects studied. Unless we are to drop these, is there any hope of escaping from an overcrowded curriculum? And overcrowding, in education as in housing, means ill-health, and turns the school into an intellectual slum. Life in such a slum breeds a disease, common, serious and often overlooked. It does not teach the pupil the meaning of knowledge. It must almost inevitably consist of superficial information—there is no time for more. Smatterings make life interesting and have their uses; but their use is limited and they are the more dangerous, because they incline us to think that we know when we do not know. Uneducated people are a danger to the world, but they are not as dangerous as a less recognized menace—the half educated, who have learnt enough to express an opinion on subjects which they do not really know, but have never learnt to be aware of their ignorance. Such people are familiar pests in every department of life, and a main duty of education is to diminish their number. It cannot do this by giving the knowledge required—omniscience is not a practical aim—but it can show people what knowledge is, so that they are aware when they do not possess it, and it achieves this in a very simple way, by seeing that the pupil studies at least

one subject in the curriculum so thoroughly and so far, that he knows what knowledge is, how difficult it is to attain, how much industry, thoroughness, precision and persistence it demands, if we are even to have a distant sight of it. A common fault of some modern forms of education is that they fail to do this, and it is a major weakness of the social studies curriculum in schools that it diffuses itself over a multiplicity of enormous problems, contents itself with a cursory view of them, and neither leaves time nor realizes the need for thorough and intensive study of any one. There is a much more serious weakness in this type of education to which I will return later. Meanwhile I pass to consider the claims of an education based on natural science.

A secondary education based on the attempt to introduce the pupil to the social sciences inevitably leads to smatterings and superficiality and fails to give him an idea of the meaning of knowledge. No such criticisms can be made against a school curriculum based on science, for it necessarily involves exact and intensive study in at least one field. Further, though science and the scientific attitude are more than two thousand years old, applied science and technology are the most characteristic features of modern civilization, and their development, resting on pure science, has transformed the conditions of human life, and appears to have become its mistress and hope. An obvious conclusion is that, in keeping with this transformation, education should be transformed, that the weight

should be thrown in the scale of science. It is a natural conclusion; but is it true?

Let me begin by saying that obviously science is one of the great achievements of man, and one of his noblest activities, that it offers the world almost boundless opportunities, and that, in its applied form, it is the most important new force in the present world. From this I should draw the practical conclusions: that we shall need in the future to produce a larger proportion of persons trained in its theories and its skills; and that everyone should have a clear sense of its significance and power in life. For those who are not specializing in science, this sense is probably better given through the history of science than through the study of any special branches in it, and some knowledge of this ought to be regarded as an essential element in higher education.

Having said this let me pass to the limitations of science. It seems at first sight to have none. I went in 1944 into a laboratory in my own university, whose members were scattered all over the country and outside it on Government business. One was doing statistical work for the Ministry of Home Security with 150 people under him, one was in the Far East in connection with chemical defence, one in Italy with the Medical Research Council Wound Shock team, one doing research for the R.A.F. In the laboratory I saw work in process on malaria, on jaundice, on wound therapy, and some secret work on gas warfare which had also yielded results of apparent importance for the treatment of venereal disease. These were the activi-

ties of one department in one university, to be multiplied, if one wishes to realize the total effects of science, a millionfold. Add to these practical results of science the atmosphere of which one is aware in any good laboratory, the enthusiasm, industry and patience, the ingenuity and burning intellectual life which drive the machine and in turn are generated by it. These scenes of practical power and beneficent activity are also homes of the great human virtues. Is it surprising if for a moment one feels that nothing else is worth study, nothing else matters, that science and her children are masters of all the kingdoms of the world and of the glory of them?

Then come second thoughts. Since 1914 we have fought two destructive wars. Science can explain much of the methods by which they were waged, but it tells us almost nothing of their causes, nor does it suggest how such disasters can be prevented. Clearly there are realms where her writ does not run. It has equally little to say about those creations of the human spirit which alone are immortal, great literature or great art. When we read Homer or Dante or Shakespeare, listen to a symphony of Beethoven, gaze at the Parthenon or the paintings in the Sistine Chapel, science has little light to throw on what we feel or why we feel it. More goes to produce the effect of Leonardo's *Last Supper* than a wall surface, a variety of paint and the physical constitution of the human eye: Beethoven's symphonies are not merely the wood and metal and catgut and waves of air through which they pass into

audible sound. Robert Bridges has admirably expressed these limitations of science:—

What kenneth she
Of colour or sound? Nothing; though science measure
true

Every wave-length of ether or air that reacheth sense,
There the hunt checketh, and her keen hounds are at fault;
For when the waves have passed the gates of ear and eye
All scent is lost: suddenly escaped the visibles
Are turned to invisible; the fine-measured motions
To immeasurable emotions; the cypher'd fractions
To a living joy that man feeleth to shrive his soul.
How should science find beauty?¹

Science is dumb if we ask it to explain the greatest
human works or emotions or experiences,

Exultations, agonies
And love, and Man's unconquerable mind:

all that Shelley was thinking of when he wrote:—

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;
To love and bear; to hope till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates.

This is to be
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.

Here we are in a mysterious yet familiar world which
belongs to Religion, Poetry and Art, but not to Science.
Yet these things, as well as atoms and elements and
cells, are part of the world.

¹ R. Bridges *Testament of Beauty* III 765f.