

SOME THOUGHTS ON UNIVERSITY EDUCATION



THIS lecture consists mainly of criticism: so, to correct the impression which it might otherwise leave, let me begin by saying that in my opinion the last forty years have been a time of steady improvement in the universities. It is not only that they have grown in size and resources, that they are infinitely better fitted in equipment and organization for their work, that there is teaching and research in far more subjects, that the number of students has greatly increased and is drawn from all classes in the nation, but that they are alive with that vitality with which this age at its best challenges its difficulties and responds to its opportunities. This rosy picture may be due to the complacency of advancing years, and members of the younger generation, who are the natural critics of the present and the makers of the future, may complain that the tints are too bright. I can only state my own impression. At the same time I believe that, as places of undergraduate education (and this, no less than research, is the university's duty), they need reform, and that the future will be astonished that we have done nothing to remedy grave weaknesses in our system. Naturally I am speaking within the limits of my own experience: my criticisms may not be true of every British university: but I believe that the general principles which this lecture urges are sound.

If you wished to destroy modern civilization, the most effective way to do it would be to abolish universities. They stand at its centre. They create knowledge and

train minds. The education which they give moulds the outlook of all educated men, and thus affects politics, administration, the professions, industry and commerce. Their discoveries and their thought penetrate almost every activity of life. The technique of the doctor and the miner, the pronouncements of the pulpit, and even of the Press, the measures of Governments are dictated or at least modified by these distant nerve-centres of intelligence, and on their health and vigour the well-being of the whole modern world depends. They add nothing to the amount of natural intelligence existing, but they refine and perfect what exists and fit it to serve purposes and take stresses which in its raw form it could not meet. Their influence is increasing and will increase unless there is a collapse of modern civilization. They have an influence on our world which is almost as great as that of the Church on the Middle Ages, and in many ways it is a similar influence.

Now let the *advocatus diaboli* speak: "Do you not notice", he will say to us, "a serious limitation to the influence of the university on our civilization? Our gravest problem is moral, spiritual. But what effect has the university on the spiritual and moral life of the world, or even on its political life so far as this is determined by spiritual and moral forces? It was not always so. Witness the originating and controlling influence of the University of Paris in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries; of Oxford and Cambridge in preparing the Reformation in this country in a later day, of Fichte and others in early nineteenth-century Germany. In the last twenty years two new conceptions of life have changed the course of the world—Communism and Nazism. The universities have not created or moulded them; like mercenaries, they have served the rulers of the day in Russia, Germany, Italy; supplied them with the weapons they need and asked no

questions. Outside the countries which accepted these philosophies, the universities have provided no alternate philosophy to counteract them. We have the spectacle of the democratic countries, conscious of deep detestation of philosophies of race and power, clinging to the traditions and memories of a nobler view of life and to values which they dimly discern but cannot formulate into a clear rational ideal. The universities do not help them. If it is too much to expect the universities to formulate an ideal, they might at least have sent out men who would have done it, given the guidance for which the world is looking, and led it not only in economics and sociology, in physics and chemistry, but in even more important things. They have not done so.

Achilles ponders in his tent;
— The kings of modern thought are dumb;
Silent they sit and not content,
And wait to see the future come.

They do not regard spiritual ideals, except the ideal of knowledge, as their business; ultimate ends are not their concern; they provide the tools of civilization but give no guidance for their use. The war could not have been waged, or at least would have been very different without them. But they did nothing to prevent or end it, or limit its savagery and destructiveness. Science served both sides with complete impartiality and provided alike penicillin and radar, the V2 and the atomic bomb." I compared the rôle of the university today to that of the Church in the Middle Ages. A very important difference between the two is apparent.

Hence a certain restiveness about the position of the university. On the one hand it is denounced as a liberal-bourgeois institution—the familiar clichés betray the source of this attack—from an opposite angle Christian

critics deplore that it fails to give any interpretation of life or guide to conduct, and is indifferent to any values except truth,

Holding no form of creed,
But contemplating all.

To such critics the reply of the university is that the god worshipped in its shrine is neither utility nor success nor social progress, nor even goodness, but truth; that its concern is knowledge, the vision of reality, that the condition of its existence is complete freedom to see things as they are; that its ideal is the ideal of Socrates “to follow the argument where it leads”, and its prayer the prayer of the dying Goethe, “More light”; or even that of Ajax in the mist, *ἐν δὲ φάει καὶ ὄλεσσον* “Light, though I perish in the light”. If critics say that this unchartered freedom, this indifference to anything but knowledge may lead to disaster either through the destruction of beliefs necessary to society or through discoveries like the atomic bomb or chemical warfare, the answer is that history is full of warnings against the sacrifice of truth to edification, that the pursuit of knowledge has led mankind, by however dangerous paths, steadily upward, and that to think or act otherwise is to fail in faith. Here is the answer to those who complain that the university is amoral, indifferent to values, concerned with nothing except knowledge.

And is not the pursuit of knowledge in itself the child and the parent of moral qualities? Does it not require, for any measure of success, industry, perseverance, disinterestedness, faith, and above all truth? Are these not virtues and values? If one was inquiring into the moral influence of the university, it is in these directions that we should find it, and in the general civilizing influence which its studies exert.

Ingenuas didicisse fideliter artes
Emollit mores nec sinit esse feros.

Of all human virtues perhaps truth is the rarest and most difficult: blindness of mind, prepossessions and the protean forms of egoism continually assail it. Necessarily it is the *genius loci* of an institution devoted to advancing knowledge. The result of studying in a university is that the student at least comes in contact with it. The condition of teaching in a university is that a man should profess it as his aim, and if his devotion grows dull the critical atmosphere which surrounds him is a whetstone to sharpen its edge. As Aristotle said, we acquire virtues by practising them, and in universities truth is perforce practised. The university is the chief generating station of it, the power-house from which it is diffused through the community. Is not that much? it will be asked. Is it indeed not enough? And if more is asked of the university, may it not be deflected from its true purpose and may not its great and proper virtue be impaired? So the university might reply.

And yet we may feel that this is not a complete answer to the charge. We may recognize the great services of the university to society, but wish them to be greater still. The condition of the world requires it. The position of the universities in modern civilization gives them a unique opportunity and a compelling responsibility. In 1852 Newman thus defined the function of the university. "If a practical end must be assigned to a university course, then I say it is training good members of society."¹ Unless we take the words "good members of society" in a narrow sense, not only the achievement but the aim of the modern university falls short of this. Yet Newman was writing at a time when the condition of the world was far more stable and the minds of men far less confused than they are today. How much stronger the case is for his view in an age when with divided and uncertain

¹ *The Scope and Nature of University Education*; Discourse 6.

minds we have to ride the storms of social and intellectual change! The university should equip us for this task too. It should train men to be not merely masters of a special field but to know what Plato meant when he wished his ruling class to learn to be “spectators of all time and all existence”. It should have wide aims and a sense of practical needs: and its graduates should go into life not so much expert in the battle-cries and tactics of the moment, as conscious of the deeper issues at stake and of the values involved in them. The churches and the universities are the natural institutions to see to this; and unfortunately the churches have lost their hold on many whom the university reaches. If it does not undertake the task, in the end we may find, as in Russia and in Hitler’s Germany, that the State will dictate a philosophy of life to the nation; or we shall drift with no philosophy at all. Either alternative is dismal.

Why does the university fail to achieve what Newman wished? My answer would be that, while there has been some thought about the organization and administration of universities, there has been very little about the education which they give to undergraduates; and this is their weakest side. In detail it is often excellent; the individual courses, though no doubt capable of improvement, are in general well designed and taught. But undergraduate education has never been thought out as a whole. It has simply grown, and its development has been determined by a combination of *vis inertiae*, the pressure of circumstances and a struggle of individual subjects for a place in the sun. We are all familiar with the process by which the curriculum develops. A subject, long neglected, makes its way into the circle, establishes a position, and then pushes out from its base to seize as much of the country as finance and its rivals and public opinion allow.

In fact university education has grown up in the casual English way. It has never been viewed, much less planned, as a whole. A cynic might give a book on the subject the title of "Drift".

Let us glance at some of the circumstances which have moulded and are moulding the development of undergraduate education. The first is a sense of the importance of thoroughness, a dislike of superficiality, of merely dipping the feet into the waters of knowledge and not plunging into their depths. This instinct is sound and this influence good.

The second influence is the immense growth of knowledge. Aristotle could write great works on a dozen subjects. Today the field of one physicist may be almost a foreign country to another, and his time is fully occupied if he is to be a master in his own. Things are no better in other fields. Thirty years ago a college tutor in Oxford was prepared to teach for the whole modern history curriculum. Today he is a mediaevalist or a modernist, and even so has to specialize in a branch of his subject. Specialism is a condition of knowledge. This influence pushes us in the same direction as the former and we have to recognize and make terms with it. It will increase.

So far I have spoken of forces which, if dangerous, are inevitable and in themselves good. But there are other influences which are powerful but unnecessary and bad. There are the highly specialized scholarship examinations at the older universities which cause the pupil who has passed the School Certificate examination at the age of fifteen to concentrate henceforward, often on a single field of study, and usually on the one which he will study in the university, neglecting other subjects indispensable to a full education. Finally, financial motives contribute to narrow education at the university. There are a number of students for whom a pass curriculum is educationally

better than the specialized honours course. But, especially in teaching, an honours degree is more marketable in the outside world than a pass degree. So financial considerations override education, and the third and fourth classes in the Honour School lists reveal the ill-advised efforts of many who have struggled with a course beyond their abilities. The same evil, due to a different cause, can be seen at Oxford and Cambridge in the case of women students who, having been driven to specialize at school by the high standard of admission, are then driven by their colleges' requirements of an honours degree to specialize still further at the university, probably in the same subject as they studied at school.

Under the continuous pressur  of such forces as I have mentioned, growth is haphazard: the parts may flourish but a sense of the whole is lost. Horace speaks of writers whose poems abound in brilliant purple patches but fail in total effect. The criticism might be applied to most of our own undergraduate education. Its weakness is an exclusive specialism which there is no attempt to counteract. The specialism, roughly speaking, is in either science or mathematics or the humanities. Science concentrates on nature and ignores man: the humanities concentrate on man and ignore nature. All "specialism enhances the centrifugal forces in society",¹ but scientific and mathematical specialism is, for the aims with which I am dealing, the most dangerous. It is not directly concerned with the human problem (though it has a great influence on it). The scientist, it has been said, explains everything but himself. Nor is it concerned with human values. The words good and evil do not naturally come into its vocabulary. Further, to deal exclusively with atoms, elements and cells is a bad preparation for dealing with or understanding human beings or human problems;

¹ *Harvard Report*, p. 53.

indeed it is no preparation at all. This is the more serious because the influence of science and the need for scientists will increase. It is significant that the numbers offering science as their main subject in the Higher Certificate increased from 44 per cent in 1939 to 53 per cent in 1946; it is melancholy to reflect how narrow the education of most of that 53 per cent was. The balance may well continue to swing in the direction of science. It is idle to attempt to counterbalance the swing by a greater output of graduates in the humanities, unless the country needs them and they can find employment. The true remedy is to see that the education of scientists includes such training in the humanities, as will enable them to play their full part in national life, not merely as superior technicians or expert specialists, but as citizens and directors of policy.

Now turn to the humanities. Specialism here has its own obvious weaknesses with which I am not now concerned, but at any rate these studies are in the human field, and they should give what is needed to train Newman's "good members of society". Literature reflects all the thoughts and feelings of man; religion and philosophy deal with his attempts to understand his nature, his place in the universe, and the principles that should regulate his conduct; history records his adventures in society. All these keep or should keep the human problem continually before the mind and show ways of interpreting it. This indeed is not true of all the humanities: economics, for instance, cover only a narrow segment of life and that (as usually taught) in a narrow way, and is of little more use for our purpose than chemistry or physics. The best studies are those in which, as in the classical school at Oxford (I take my instances from the university which I know best), history, philosophy and literature are combined; or where, as in Modern Greats, economics are combined with philosophy. I once asked an eminent banker

what subjects a man who wished to go into business should study at the university: his answer was “Economics, and, of course, philosophy”. The significant words here are “of course”.

But it is a question not merely of the subjects to be studied but of the way in which we study them. Salt can lose its savour; the humanities can lose their humanity. Education continually tends to degenerate into technique, and the life tends to go out of all subjects when they become technical. It is possible to read Plato’s *Republic*, as I did when an undergraduate, without realizing that it deals with the deepest of all problems—what the good life is, why men should wish to live it, how a state can be created in which it can be lived. It is possible to read the *Oedipus Tyrannus* of Sophocles without realizing that its characters are people as alive as ourselves, reacting as we might to the impact of tragic events. Professor Whitehead remarks of his own schooldays: “We studied some plays of Shakespeare which were the worst feature of all. To this day I cannot read *King Lear*, having had the advantage of studying it accurately at school.”¹ It is possible to read history and get a history scholarship and an honours degree in it without divining the deeps that lie beneath laws and wars, diplomacy and institutions, or hearing behind the tumult and the shouting the still sad music of humanity: indeed that music is inaudible in most history books, though always present in the great ones. So easily can education decline into routine and mechanism.

That is one of the dangers which we have to face. Another, allied to it, much more respectable, and perhaps less easily escaped, is inherent in the nature of modern scholarship. Exact knowledge is a condition of all study, and to acquire it the scholar must learn the techniques by which knowledge is won. A historian for instance must

¹ *Essays in Science and Philosophy*, p. 37.