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Comparative Value of Personal Reputation and Conferred Degrees*

BY CARL H. NAU

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The title of this address is not of my own choosing, but it is a subject upon which I have long entertained some more or less ill-digested, contrary, and, at times, opposite and mutually destructive opinions.

Herbert Spencer in the opening paragraph of his essay on *Education* says:

It has been truly remarked that, in order of time, decoration precedes dress. Among people who submit to great physical suffering that they may have themselves handsomely tattooed, extremes of temperature are borne with but little attempt at mitigation. Humboldt tells us that an Orinoco Indian, though quite regardless of bodily comfort, will yet labor for a fortnight to purchase pigment wherewith to make himself admired; and that the same woman who would not hesitate to leave her hut without a fragment of clothing on, would not dare to commit such a breach of decorum as to go out unpainted. Voyagers uniformly find that colored beads and trinkets are much more prized by wild tribes than are calicoes or broadcloths. And the anecdotes we have of the ways in which, when shirts and coats are given, they turn them to some ludicrous display, show how completely the idea of ornament predominates over that of use. Nay, there are still more extreme illustrations—witness the fact narrated by Capt. Speke of his African attendants, who strutted about in their goat-skin mantles when the weather was fine, but when it was wet, took them off, folded them up and went about naked, shivering in the rain. Indeed, the facts of aboriginal life seem to indicate that dress is developed out of decorations. And when we remember that even among ourselves most think more about the fineness of the fabric than its warmth, and more about the cut than the convenience—when we see that the function is still in great measure sub-ordinated to the appearance—we have further reason for inferring such an origin.

It is not a little curious that the like relations hold with the mind. Among mental as among bodily acquisitions, the ornamental comes before the useful. Not only in times past, but almost as much in our own era, that knowledge which conduces to personal well-being has been postponed to that which brings applause. In the Greek schools, music, poetry, rhetoric, and a philosophy which, until Socrates taught, had but little bearing upon action, were the dominant subjects; while knowledge aiding the arts of life had a very subordinate place. And in our own universities and schools at the present moment the like antithesis holds. We are guilty of something like a platitude when we say that throughout his after-career a boy, in nine cases out of ten, applies his Latin and Greek to no practical purposes. The remark is trite that in his shop, or his office, in managing his estate or his family, in playing his part as director of a bank or a railway, he is very little aided by this knowledge he took so many years to acquire

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—so little, that generally the greater part of it drops out of his memory; and if he occasionally vents a Latin quotation, or alludes to some Greek myth, it is less to throw light on the topic in hand than for the sake of effect. If we inquire what is the real motive for giving boys a classical education, we find it to be simply conformity to public opinion. Men dress their children's minds as they do their bodies, in the prevailing fashion. As the Orinoco Indian puts on his paint before leaving his hut, not with a view to any direct benefit, but because he would be ashamed to be seen without it; so, a boy's drilling in Latin and Greek is insisted on, not because of their intrinsic value, but that he may not be disgraced by being found ignorant of them—that he may have "the education of a gentleman"—the badge marking a certain social position and bringing a consequent respect.

The analogy is almost perfect, and the eminent philosopher's statement that "dress is developed out of decorations" might readily be paraphrased to describe our own well-meant but, in part at least, misguided attempt to substitute the decorative bauble of a conferred degree for the warm and sheltering garment of a personal reputation.

With the history of what is known as the "C.P.A. movement" in these United States you are all more or less familiar. The report of the special committee on form of organization, which led up to the formation of the American Institute of Accountants, epitomized the conditions in the organization of the accountancy profession in this country, and proposed the present form of organization, as a partial remedy for the well-recognized defects which had developed in our former programme of attempting to establish professional standards and a professional solidarity by enacting statutes and conferring degrees.

Innumerable instances of the futility of attempting to substitute a degree for a reputation could be culled from the history of the evolution of our profession, from the passage of the first C. P. A. act in New York in 1896 to the formation of this institute, whose first anniversary is the occasion of our meeting here today. Suffice it to say that the formation of the institute was an attempt to nationalize the profession, with centralized control from within itself, in the place of the former scattering control which lacked uniformity of both aims and ideals, and which was influenced quite as much by political as by professional considerations.

So far as I am concerned, I am for nationalization and standardization in everything from accountants' societies to

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divorce laws. Both historic precedent and my own observations have firmly persuaded me that the best form of organization for a profession is the form which will at least permit the profession to attempt to regulate itself, and not a form based on regulation by statutes and their varied administration. I long ago abandoned the idea that people can be made either wise or good by law.

Our attempt in trying to regulate the profession by passing laws has now been supplemented by an attempt to regulate ourselves by precept and example, through the instrumentality of an organization aiming to do nothing except to set a standard for its own membership and thus to exercise a moral force in the community.

The writer was very active in lobbying for and obtaining the passage of the Ohio C.P.A. law. One of the members of the legislature which finally passed the law was Frederick C. Howe, lawyer, author and sociologist, now commissioner of immigration at the port of New York. In reply to an argument urging the merit of our bill upon him, Mr. Howe declared himself somewhat as follows: "I am afraid that what you are trying to do is to substitute a degree for a reputation." The remark has always lingered in my memory, and my subsequent observations have not lessened its force.

Whether or not the American Institute of Accountants shall prove a better instrument than its predecessor, through which to advance the opportunity for worth-while service and to raise the standards, and thus the reputation, of our profession and its practitioners, depends entirely upon the wisdom and upon the fidelity to lofty standards and high purposes with which we undertake to regulate ourselves. The only thing we can hope for from the institute is that, by co-operative effort, it may succeed in so establishing a reputation for itself that the individual member may feel it desirable likewise to conserve his own reputation so as not to jeopardize his membership in the group which sets the standard.

Think over the names of the men who tower above their fellows today, or who, in fame, have come down to us in the annals of our country or of the race. How many of them are

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remembered by the learned degrees they happened to possess? Are they not remembered rather by what they were and by what they did?

Who knows or cares to know what degree was ever conferred upon a Franklin, a Washington, a Jefferson, a Hamilton or a Lincoln; an Edison, a Whitney, a Howe, a Morse or a Fulton; an Emerson, a Sumner, a Lowell or a Howells; or upon any of the good and great who have contributed so much to our social, economic or intellectual progress?

How many people know that Western Reserve university conferred a degree upon my famous fellow-townsmen, Mark Hanna, whose chief contact with the interior of college life was his ability and disposition to provide endowments? Is Mark Hanna remembered by his degree, or is he remembered for his reputation as a maker of presidents and a doer of big things in a big way?

If my memory is not at fault, it was Harvard university which made a practice of conferring the degree of L.L.D. upon the governors of Massachusetts. Hence, all that was necessary to obtain this learned degree was to be politician enough to be elected governor. Harvard, however, made at least one exception to this general custom. When Ben Butler was elected governor of the state, Harvard chose not to remember her long-established precedent. Butler, having offended the staid traditions was overlooked when the time came for this gracious, entirely harmless and useless piece of pleasantries. When Butler was twitted about the circumstance by some impertinent friend, his answer was, "Harvard can go to thunder with her old degree. I am the only governor Massachusetts has had for some time that could read the darned old parchment after he got it."

When I think of the fetish that some of us are disposed to make of our C.P.A. degree, I am sometimes reminded of the big fellow in Ade's *College Widow*. He was kept in the college chiefly because of his physical size and his weight and value in the line-up of the college football team. You will remember how, after lagging behind year after year, he finally was

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graduated, and, as he obtained his coveted sheepskin, how he waved it aloft and declared with great unction, "Educated, by God."

Of course, there is also such a thing as acquiring a reputation of which none of us would feel especially proud. To establish a reputation and to achieve fame does not necessarily imply either merit or virtue. You will recall that,

The youth who fired the Ephesian dome,
Outlived in fame the pious fool who reared it.

It is wholly possible for this institute and for the organized profession in this country to establish such a reputation that none of us would care to dwell upon our connection with accountancy.

Many another institution in the history of the world, which had its origin in the loftiest motives and the highest purposes, drifted away from the principles and the spirit which animated its founders and lives to fame only to be execrated by posterity. Historical instances will at once occur to you, and it is not the purpose of this paper to enlarge upon this theme. I need only to call your attention, in passing, to several notable examples of formalism and convention surviving after all of the original spirit had departed from a worthy institution.

You will recall that the Inquisition, with all its atrocities and cruelties, had its origin in a movement that desired only the good of its fellows.

The junkers were a secret society formed to combat the repressive imperialism of Napoleon. The present cataclysm of madness in Europe is the culmination of perverted junkerism.

The guilds of medieval Europe were often employed as instruments of oppression, and even the modern labor union, or employers' association, has been known to be used in the interest of the cupidity of its faithless leaders, instead of the enlightened self-interest of its members.

It is not by their titles, or honors or degrees, but "by their fruits," says the Scripture, "ye shall know them"; and again, "The letter killeth but the spirit giveth life."

Everyone will agree not only that there is such a thing as personal reputation, quite distinct from any consideration of

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either titles or degrees, but also that such a reputation may be very valuable to its possessor, indeed may far outweigh the scholastic honors or other "handles" which he may have the right to attach to an otherwise worthy and unblemished name.

There is also such a thing as the reputation of a class, the reputation of a vocation, of a profession and of a people; and the reputation of one's clan or group is quite as important as one's individual reputation. This is the meaning of the modern tendency toward association and organization of those having common aims, common purposes, a common vocation or profession. As members of a professional body, therefore, we should be quite as jealous of the reputation of the American Institute of Accountants as we are of our individual and personal reputations.

Yes, there is such a thing as personal reputation, just as there is such a thing as personal intelligence; but there is also such a thing as the intelligence of a position which is something quite apart from and something more than the intelligence of the person. We are often prone to ascribe our importance and our success to our personal intelligence, when indeed a large part of the credit is due to the intelligence of the position which we may happen to occupy. Perhaps the thought that I am trying to convey can best be illustrated if I ask you to go to your office some morning and take a look at the chair you sit in while functioning in the particular position in the economic game which it is your privilege to fill. Then inquire how much of the intelligence exhibited in playing the game belongs to yourself and how much of it belongs to the chair, to the position which you happen to fill. Will the game go on if someone other than yourself fills the chair, or will it stop because you are not there to fill it? Will the railroad continue to run because someone occupies the president's or the train dispatcher's chair, other than the one who thinks that the whole work depends upon him? Upon the other hand, what would happen if you were present but without a chair to occupy, a position to fill, a part in the game to play? Then ask yourself how much of the intelligence with which you credit yourself really belongs to the chair and not to you, to the position and not to the person.

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In a similar sense the reputation of our profession and of its practitioners as a class is quite as important to the game we are engaged in playing as is the reputation of any single one of its practitioners. Consider what your opportunity as an accountant would be, did not accountancy itself establish a reputation for useful service in the business community. Is it not true that some part at least of what you deem to be your personal reputation, likewise does, in fact, attach to your position, to your profession, and not to yourself? It therefore becomes extremely important that every member of this institute shall carefully regulate his own personal and professional conduct, and shall insist that every other member do likewise, in order that the profession itself, in its organized capacity as represented by the American Institute of Accountants, may deserve, and hence inevitably achieve, the kind of reputation which will result in widening the scope and in multiplying the opportunities for useful service of each individual member of the institute.