

## THE MEANING OF LIBERAL STUDY.

BY HENRY BRADFORD SMITH.

THE historical connotations, which words acquire, yield many times a true insight into the habits of men's thought. The word "liberal" in its origin and, when attached to a substantive, means "free". When is an intellectual pursuit free, catholic, humane, disinterested? Such synonymes are often used to suggest a meaning when analysis has failed, but suggestions they remain, as prone to lead us astray as they are to clarify our thinking.

They point, however, to distinctions, which may well be considered in their turn. An insight is *catholic*, when it is alive to more than a single point of view and when it is aware that points of view conflict. One possesses this trait, if he can step into another's boots, if he can with sympathy look out upon the world through other men's spectacles. If our souls were less intimately chained to our corporeal being and could from time to time take up their abode in other clay, prejudice would no doubt be moderated and that decentralization of the ego, which is the first condition of a catholic taste, would be supremely aided.

A mind's attitude is *humane*, when it has come to rate its own point of view as of no more worth than that of other minds. It may rate its own opinion higher than another's but not because it is its *own*. A not uncommon illusion is that one which tells us that there is something unique about our private insights and it is this illusion, which a humane culture will dissipate.

The pursuit of truth is *disinterested* when it has ceased to serve and gratify our merely private desires. A condition of this pursuit is a recognition that the order of nature does not invariably conform to human wishes, that this order possesses a dignity that surpasses one's own small place in the world, that demands, accordingly, something that approaches an absolute respect.

Our tentative analysis, then, yields this result: A man is free in so far as this decentralization of himself has been profoundly brought about and liberal studies are precisely those best calculated to produce this same effect. It is clear that our list of liberal pursuits will contain none that produce merely vocational aptitudes, for these have an eye to private and, indirectly, an eye to public advantage of a different sort. A man may gain his private aims the more effectually because of a liberal education or he may renounce his private aims the more intelligently for the like reason. It is not the purpose of a liberal education, if our analysis be correct, to effect these or any other concrete ends. Rather it will leave the result in the case of each one the less determinable, the less easy to predict. In a word it will leave one *free*. It will provide one with so many sided an outlook upon the world, that his decision to make of himself what he will, will be based upon what may fairly be called a rational ground. He will have become a responsible agent and will accept the consequences of his decision as those of his own choosing.

Suppose on the other hand that the public curriculum has become "vocationalized", in recognition of the fact that the majority can never receive a liberal training. You propose to prepare this child, who is the father of the man, for "life", you say. Yea, for life, but not for a life of his own choosing. You have got hold of him, too young to judge, and by a special education, you have settled his destiny in advance, you have made the possibility of future choice abortive. This is the essential sin against the holy spirit of man. It is also the stuff of which social revolutions are made, for deep down in his heart he will harbor his resentment. His destiny has not been one of his own making and he is in no way bound to accept its consequences. In point of fact where lies the richest soil for social unrest? Is it not among the class of vocationally trained, who feel that they have been some how deprived of their spiritual birthright? In this direction lies one of the most deep-seated causes of moral discontent.

Liberal studies then are those that produce the free man and the free man is he who can justify his acts and in some sense his very destiny on rational grounds. Suppose a man, who is by temperament a non-conformist, impelled to oppose some social convention which he judges to be false. His effort fails and the community regards him as a crank. That is to say, he is rated not a person of sane judgment and so not as a free man, but rather as the victim

of his own misguided temperament. The man himself, however, knows his family history. He reflects that his father and some of his remoter ancestors had experiences like his own; that they not infrequently espoused a cause which failed at first but which triumphed in the end. "I am a chip of the old block", he says to himself and finds no little satisfaction in the thought. And why? Because his own behavior is no longer an isolated fact. It has been rationalized because shown to be a case of something that is operating in a universal sense. He is so far a free man and a responsible being because he has given his act an abstract meaning. Everyone who commits a crime will attempt a moral justification, because behavior that has not been rationalized is not the behavior of a free agent. The adolescent child would be less troubled by the emotions which stir him, if he should understand that they are normal concomitants of his development.

Royce somewhere remarks in substance, that it is those misfortunes of life that cannot be foreseen, which particularly discourage us—those slips of destiny, the fruit of a seemingly hard and unrelenting providence. A man must be an optimist indeed, who imagines that scientific prophesy will one day banish all the tragedy, with which our common human nature is beset. Now liberal studies are those which create the free man and they do this by saving him from the grasp of grosser circumstance. They prepare for life but for no particular life, for no special vocation. Their applications will, accordingly, be incidental to their pursuit and not ends in themselves. They will purport to furnish a general theory of the universe, to which the particularities of daily life may be attached. The world of common experience is a collection of concrete objects largely out of conscious relation to one another. The liberally trained mind is forever seeking out the connections of things, uniting the discreet parts of the world in one intelligible whole, interpolating, filling in, creating continuity, bringing individual facts under an abstract point of view.

It is clear that our list of liberal studies will contain besides the philosophical disciplines the pure as well as the experimental sciences. But it will not be manifest that literature in its various forms will fall within the scope of our definition. A few considerations, however, will be enough to show that such is really the case. De Quincey was fond of distinguishing between what he termed the literature of knowledge and the literature of power. It is the literature of power that stirs the fancy, that gives wing to the imagina-

tion of man. But this distinction is relative, for be it known that every act of knowing is as much an act of the imagination as the recognition of a fact. There is a deal of knowledge which cannot be expressed in the technical language of a science, for example, those insights into human nature which satire reveals. Such truths are but partially expressed, they may even remain inarticulate, in the absence of any genuinely literary art. Insight and the art of expression must go hand in hand. A good style is so far a wasted acquisition if it be not the instrument of a fine intellect.

The disinterested interest in truth for its own sake, which it is the end of a liberal training to awaken and foster in each man, is in some rough sense a measure of his intellectual power, for it feeds upon success. A liberal training is a voyage of discovery among the islands of abstraction, among the facts and fancies of the representative intellect. For the most the routes are charted in advance. The traveler must serve his nautical apprenticeship before he ventures into unknown seas. The higher adventures reserve themselves for those who have the will to seek them out and the wit to carry them through.

But the disinterested interest in truth for its own sake is more than all this. It is the very soul and substance of our human progress. Had the Greek geometers professed no curiosity in the properties of conic sections, the science of navigation and many another science would not have been born. There was no domain in the vast regions of pure and applied mathematics, which Carl Friedrich Gauss did not enrich with his masterly contributions but he was impatient of the demand that theory should justify itself by applications. "No one, thank God, has yet been able to apply his knowledge practically in this field", he said in substance of that non-Euclidean geometry, whose existence he was the first to recognize and whose content he was the first to develop. The work of Marconi became possible for the first time, when the theoretical labors of Faraday, Maxwell and Hertz had been consummated. The American genius for practical inventions, of which we are prone to boast over-much, depends upon scientific research, which calls for genius of a rarer sort. Industrial triumphs occur as almost necessary incidents, when liberal knowledge has reached its full fruition.

Today we profess an unbounded faith in the power of public education to cure our social ills, but we may well fear lest the stream become polluted. The more enlightened men are the more free will they become. The eighteenth century, a time in which so much

of our political liberty was won, might yield us many a warning. That supreme optimist, the Frenchman Condorcet, says: "Political enlightenment is the immediate sequence of the progress of the sciences". But "let us not challenge the oppressors (the princes) to league themselves together against reason; let us carefully conceal from them the close and inevitable connection between enlightenment and liberty; let us not teach them beforehand that a nation free from prejudice soon becomes a free nation."