

# Modern University Problems

An Address at a University of Missouri Convocation  
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by

FRANK THILLY

*Professor of Philosophy, Cornell University, and  
Sometime Professor at the University of Missouri*

*With an Introduction by*

WALTER WILLIAMS

*President of the University of Missouri*



**A**T the invitation of the University, Dr. Frank Thilly, professor of philosophy in the University of Missouri from 1893 till 1904, returned in 1930 to address students and faculty members in the opening University convocation of the school year 1930-31. His address, together with the introductory remarks of President Walter Williams of the University, is contained in this bulletin.



*Dr. Frank Thilly*

## President Williams' Introduction

We begin today another school year at the University of Missouri. Let us make it something else and more than simply another year. Let us make it a year of joyous usefulness with increasing emphasis upon the things of the mind and the spirit, the things most worth while.

I welcome in this behalf to the year of opportunity, to cooperative effort to this high purpose, new students and old students, new members of the faculty and old members of the faculty.

It is our good fortune to have as speaker at this opening convocation a former professor of philosophy at this University, professor of philosophy now at Cornell University, former president of the American Association of University Professors, Doctor of Laws of the University of Missouri, inspiring teacher, distinguished scholar, wise counsellor, unfailing friend. He will discuss "Modern University Problems" and seek, I know, to set our feet at the beginning of the way, in the right path.

I present Dr. Frank Thilly.

# Modern University Problems

I deem it a great privilege and an honor to take a part in the opening exercises of the new academic year. The University of Missouri is particularly dear to my heart; for here I held my first professorship in philosophy and psychology, and in this hospitable community I won life-long friends. And I found a congenial field of work; for the breath of freedom permeated the campus. President Jesse encouraged the new trend in American academic life; and later on, Walter Williams, a distinguished young journalist, became a power for good in the University and an inspiration to its teachers.

The great service rendered by President Jesse was not fully appreciated during his life-time; he was building a new intellectual edifice here, a house not made by hands, and only the practiced eye of the architect can see the finished product. Any intelligent person may recognize the outstanding figures in the academic world—the men who have “made good”—but it is a mark of genius to discover worth while scholars when they are young—in the shell, as it were.

Few college presidents possess the gift. President Jesse had it in a very marked degree; he found young men of promise, men who had not yet “arrived” so far as reputation was concerned; he had the gift of divination. And, so, he created here in Columbia a great modern university—a truth-seeking university, the only kind of university that is worth while: an institution of learning of which you have every reason to be proud.

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And now, let me turn to “the subject of my story”: Modern University Problems.

The modern spirit which expressed itself in the Renaissance and Reformation was a spirit of criticism and revolt: revolt against the medieval spirit of authority and “traditionalism,” revolt against the subordination of the individual to social control, revolt against the subjection of reason to faith. It left no field of human activity untouched; it transformed religion, morals, politics, science, philosophy, literature, and art; it demanded freedom of thought, freedom of conscience, freedom of action; it struggled for the deliverance of the individual from ecclesiastical, political and economic tutelage; it preached the gospel of the rights of man, liberty, equality,

fraternity; it intensified man's interest in the practical affairs of life on earth. It is still at work, embodying itself in human institutions, changing, transforming, reforming, meeting new difficulties, solving new problems, creating new ideals.

We discover a similar spirit in the history of American education, which is forsaking the old paths and feverishly searching after new roads to new goals. It has revolutionized our old colleges and given us the modern university with its opposition to authority, tradition, and restraint, its interest in experience and the practical, its demand for freedom to indulge individual tastes and talents. The principle of free research, the freedom to investigate and to teach, has asserted itself against the dogmatic temper and methods of the middle ages with every prospect of a satisfactory outcome. The narrow sectarian and political influences which once cast their blight upon many of our institutions of learning have not been able to maintain themselves against the protests of a healthy public opinion in the more intelligent communities; and the institutions which have sinned against academic liberty have been generally condemned. There is less interference, in the better universities, on the part of boards of trustees, with purely educational matters than in earlier times, and many voices are heard in favor of limiting the powers of presidents and other executive officers. The rigorous curriculum of the old college has been abandoned and its place has been taken in the college of arts and sciences by a more elastic or wholly free system of election—every opportunity being given to the undergraduate to work out his own intellectual salvation. The old principles and methods of academic instruction are being subjected to constant criticism, and countless experiments tried in the hope of finding the philosopher's stone in education. There has also been a relaxation of discipline: the student is left free to govern his personal life as he deems best, and he is not held as strictly to account in his studies as formerly. With the development of the lecture system has come greater freedom; he is thrown on his own responsibility and may divide his time for work and play to suit himself.

The word freedom, we see, looms large in the higher institutions of learning, as it does everywhere else in modern life. Another phrase of which we are fond is practical efficiency; the value of an education is said to depend on what it will do for a man in the way of preparing him for life. This, too, is a modern trait: the ancient Greek thinker prized knowledge for its own sake; the contemporary "educator" is inclined to ask, What can we do with it? "Was dabei herauskommt?" Subjects which can be shown to have some bearing on practical affairs are popular; the mere handling of natural objects and physical instruments of all kinds gives us the feeling that we are doing something useful; and the visitation of almshouses, penitentiaries, and jails, or the gathering of answers to questionnaires, announced as features of a course of study, inspires confidence in the minds of the student body and the general public alike. The development of the old professional schools in size and practical

efficiency, the establishment of new colleges of engineering, agriculture, education, commerce, journalism, and household economics, and the introduction of vocational courses in the college of arts are signs of the same modern trend.

The administrative activities of the modern American university have also been increased and perfected: our institutions are swarming with officials of all sorts who are "doing" things, and the click of the typewriter is heard in the college halls. Presidents as a rule abandon the work of scholarship for administrative routine; deans give a large portion of their time to the duties of their offices; and even the professors are burdened with the work of "running" large departments and with service on committees, of which there is apt to be a great number. The same spirit has taken hold of the student body: there are so many "student activities" that it is sometimes hard to find an active student. According to many, greater benefit accrues from these practical diversions and the social side of academic life than from study and association with professors: professors, it would almost seem, are survivals of the past,—survivals which interfere with the perfection and harmony of academic life.

All these tendencies have their value: indeed, we owe to the spirit underlying them nearly everything that we call progressive in our modern life. But exaggerations have appeared in the field of education, as elsewhere in the life of our people, and of such it is the part of wisdom to take note. The spirit of reflection and criticism, the opposition to authority and tradition have their good sides, but there is frequent danger of their overshooting the mark. In our antagonism to the old principles and ideals, we have reached the stage of having no principles and ideals at all. We have fallen into the sere and yellow leaf—into a kind of academic scepticism and anarchism: we have no clear ideas as to what is really meant by a college education; we make all kinds of experiments or impose the task of discovering the promised land upon the students themselves; and in the meanwhile "the hungry sheep look up and are not fed." The professional schools have a purpose and a program, how well suited to the demands of society need not concern us here; they inspire confidence because they appear to know what they want. Besides offering foundation courses for the other colleges, the colleges of arts seem to provide a free field for any one to work out any idea he pleases and as he pleases, all the way from spending four years in comparative idleness to laboring faithfully in acquiring a rich and varied culture. The old college has gone to pieces; we do not know what to do with the remains; we have no common educational ideal and hence must leave it to the student himself to discover the meaning of the college of arts.

The spirit of individualism, the opposition to restraint, may also be a good leaven, but not when it degenerates into subjectivism, selfishness, and lawlessness. The elective system in our universities has its historical meaning; it broke the hold of the old hard and fast curriculum, it made a place for the new natural and social



sciences, and encouraged individual tastes and talents. It was a heroic solution of an academic problem; some of those who voted for free election did so in the belief not that it was the ideal, but that the traditional rigorism was an evil to be got rid of. The weakness of the free elective system is that it is not a system at all; there is no guiding principle or purpose in it; it is clay in the potter's hands, and the underclassman at least is not much of a potter. The assertion that the student's own interests will guide him aright assumes that he has developed real interests and forgets that a man cannot have an interest in a subject with which he is not acquainted at all. The assumption that whatever a person studies will have a beneficent effect upon his mind may be true, but we have no guarantee in free election that the student will pursue any line of study long enough to do him any good. The trouble with the *laissez-faire* doctrine in education is similar to the trouble with *laissez-faire* everywhere else; it would work only with perfect human beings—and a freshman certainly is not of that class. We do not dream of allowing a student of medicine, law, engineering, agriculture, or even a graduate student to go as he pleases; we require him to follow some more or less definite plan of work. The elective system in our country is a poor and partial imitation of the German idea; we forget that the German freshman is more mature and far better educated than our freshman, and that although he may take what courses he pleases, he cannot pass his doctoral or state examinations unless he knows his classical philology or his philosophy or his political science or his law or his medicine or his theology or whatever else the limited field may be to which he is supposed to be giving his attention. It seems to me we have been very naive with respect to this matter in America—imitation is suicide here—but it looks as though we might recover our senses.

One of the minor results of the *laissez-faire* system has been to arouse competition among some professors. This has not been an unmixed blessing. Doubtless the desire to have large classes may incite a teacher to put forth his best efforts who might otherwise be tempted to slight his work. But, it has also had a tendency to lead others to lower the standards of scholarship, to make lectures merely entertaining, to press as gently upon the student as possible. One was sometimes struck, in reading announcements of courses, with the pleading tone of the writers, and one was reminded of the advertisements in the book-catalogues, or of Protagoras's promise to the young man: "If you associate with me, on the very day you will return a better man than you came." There have been "snap courses" and advertising geniuses in nearly every university in the land; and large figures are not displeasing to some presidential eyes.

Another symptom of the exaggerated emphasis placed upon a certain kind of practical efficiency is the dissatisfaction exhibited by men of the administrative type towards the legislation of the faculties. In their desire to have all questions decided quickly and in accordance with their own ideas, they are apt to regard unwillingness

to prompt acquiescence in their proposals as a proof of incapacity or even disloyalty; nothing is so well done as what is done quickly and what one does oneself! And so we discover in this democratic country of ours strong tendencies towards absolutism in university government: presidents, deans, and heads of departments sometimes forget the real purpose of the university in their endeavors to introduce business methods, and are tempted to substitute means for ends. In this attitude they are often supported by the members of our governing bodies, the boards of trustees, who, since they are themselves men of business, regard government from above as the only natural mode of procedure. But there are many indications of opposition to academic paternalism in the faculties, and here and there, of a willingness on the part of the authorities to bring about a more democratic form of government in university life. Let us hope that the words uttered by President Eliot in his Phi Beta Kappa address before Cornell University may become applicable to all American universities: "A modern university," he declared, "being a voluntary cooperative association of highly individualistic persons for teaching and for advancing knowledge, is thoroughly democratic in spirit, and everywhere its objects are to train productive mental power in the young, to store such power in a selected group from the next older generation, and to apply this stored power to the advancement of knowledge." And let us hope that the *university* form of government may really be a prophesy, as he (Eliot) says it is: "It really foretells the ultimate form of all good government among men—a government based on cooperative intelligence, almost universal good will, and noble loves"; and let us hope that we shall feel no hesitancy in the future in agreeing with his final statement: "The American university gives an effective demonstration of the good results of the voluntary association in common work of many independent and unlike individuals possessing the maximum of good will; and academic freedom is, therefore, a good type of the considerate, human freedom which will ultimately become universal."

We find the same deification of the practical of which we spoke before, in the increase and exaggeration of the so-called student activities. The real business of education is frequently forgotten in the intense desire to be doing something "practical." Many undergraduates believe that they get more out of their journalistic activities, their managerships, their dramatic, glee, and other clubs, their fraternity life, and all the other "side-shows" of the university than out of their classes. One hears a great deal about "mere knowledge," about "learning by doing," about "studying life and not books"—and everything is supposed to be helpful except strenuous thinking. A freshman will spend the early morning hours chalking sidewalks to advertise some game in the proud conviction that now at last he is getting at the heart of life. The contempt for merely intellectual pursuits which obtains among a certain class of students shows itself in the attitude of those who regard the pass mark as the "gentleman's mark." Some of the old Christian saints were ashamed

of having a body: many of our college saints are ashamed of having a mind. We are ourselves to blame for much of this: we admit scores of boys who have neither the capacity nor the taste for the real work of a university; boys, whose main object in attending a higher institution of learning is to enjoy the accidental and incidental phases of academic life, and who acquire nothing at the university but bad habits, the effects of which it takes them years to overcome. They and their parents rest content in the thought that they have been at college and have made friends and belong to a privileged class and can join the Yale, Princeton, or Harvard club at home.

The indifference toward things intellectual is also seen in the mild interest displayed in whatever makes an appeal to the mind, and in the exaggerated interest in athletics. The attendance at debating societies, literary and other clubs is small; the number of students competing for the many academic prizes and honors is not large; and the number of those who take part in dramatic performances is comparatively small. If one may judge from a hasty perusal of the college papers and the conversations of students, the athletic activities form the chief object of interest in the mind of the average undergraduate. No one is opposed to physical education and sports of all kinds, but the natural relations between physical and mental training are often obscured and ignored in our modern athleticism; and one of the problems for us to solve is the restoration of athletics to its proper place in the university economy. Some youths devote so much attention to the care of the body that the mind is threatening to become a rudimentary organ and to disappear, from disuse. It is to be hoped that we shall regain our balance in this field, and that, instead of having a small group of over-trained experts and a large crowd of passive lookers-on, we shall succeed in inducing the great mass of our students to exercise their muscles as well as their lungs. A few words ought to be said with respect to the manners and morals of our students, for these, too, are matters of culture. The puerile practices of former days of which some of the older alumni love to talk in mellow moments are disappearing; it is seldom that we hear of the utterly stupid pranks which were once played; they can happen only in places that are colleges in name only. The carousals, brawls, licentiousness, and brutality which characterized the academic life of Europe at certain periods of its history do not seem ever to have gained a foothold in our country. Drunkenness is not altogether unknown however; nearly every university has a band of men who struggle hard to win the distinction of being "dead game sports" and who receive loyal encouragement from some visiting alumni who have never grown up.

As to the emphasis on the practical or the useful, there is, of course, nothing sinful in that. One of the functions of the university is to fit a man for a profession; and there is no evidence that anyone has complained of an overabundance of efficient men in any higher calling. The danger lies in putting a narrow construction upon the meaning of the practical. It is highly questionable whether a person is really well

trained for his work in life who is uncouth and uncultured, who is glaringly ignorant of his mother tongue and the cultural achievements of his people, who conceives of his profession as a mere means of gaining him a livelihood, and who fails to understand that a human being is more than a machine. Preparation for life means a great deal more than fitness to get one's bread and butter, and to digest it. The question, When is a man efficient, what is preparation for life? is an old one; but, I think Socrates and Plato and Aristotle came nearer answering it, than many a modern American university. The exaggeration of the practical has likewise led, in many cases, to a neglect of and contempt for the theoretical foundations in vocational training: to know how to run a machine is considered a feat far superior to understanding its principles. (The Germans have assumed that "the highest theoretic instruction was none too good for their students," and the results they have achieved would seem to support the view that the highest theoretic instruction is the most practical.) If theology were taught in some universities in our land, we should expect to find courses given on "How to Run A Parish (with laboratory work)," "Church Furniture, Altar Rails, and Baptismal Fonts," "Ecclesiastical Book-keeping and Accounts," and similar "useful" matters. Perhaps there are such courses.

In other words, the desire to make the university more life-like generally means to make it more business-like; it is born of the extreme admiration for industrial success which characterizes our age. This spirit has affected many colleges of arts; it has expressed itself in the demand for vocational courses. Such a demand is not in itself an unreasonable demand; there is no reason why a young man should not prepare himself at the university for an occupation other than those for which our traditional professional schools make provision. And it would be well if the student could do this in surroundings calculated to give him more than a bread-and-butter view of life. But the temptation to hew to a narrow, practical line and to rule out everything that does not seem to have a direct connection with making a livelihood, in name at least, is strong, and we find persons advocating, for example, the teaching of engineering English and journalistic English or whatever other different types of English there may be. The trouble is, we already have too much of that style of English; and our efforts ought to be bent in the direction of improving the student's ability to think clearly and logically and to express his thoughts in language which will not make the judicious grieve.

The narrow conception of practical efficiency is rooted in false ideals, in the glorification of the mechanical and the external which the material progress of our age has brought with it. All this manifests itself in the undue emphasis placed upon material things, visible results, quick returns, quantitative standards, and administrative skill; in the pride of large numbers of students and instructors, large classes, large departments, large appropriations. A president who can obtain all these things is regarded as a "success." It is pleasant in this connection, to remember the founding

of the Johns Hopkins University, whose chief glory lay in its great professors; and it is consoling to note also that there are universities in the world, in which the number of buildings, professors, and students is not the chief source of academic pride.

While this whole question of utilitarian education was being discussed a number of years ago, the American Association of University Professors passed a resolution against extreme specialization in the college: "The Association disapproves the use of a large proportion of a college course in the interest of any specialty or profession. The faculty of the college of arts and sciences should fix the limits of permissible specialization, and this should be done so as to assure due breadth of collegiate instruction for all who receive the college degree." In this connection the following statement in a catalogue of Cornell University is interesting: "The success of an engineer has come more and more to depend upon his ability to meet men of education and culture on equal terms. Since the work in the four-year course in this college is almost wholly technical, it is preferable that the student, before entering the College, should have a thorough general education, and, if possible, the training of a liberal college course. Those who have not had this broader education should, if possible, devote one or two years to subjects taught in the College of Arts and Sciences."

It is also worth noting that since many years ago some of the leaders in the engineering profession have favored a classical education for engineers, among them: CHARLES STEINMETZ, ex-president, American Institute of Electric Engineers; E. L. CORTHELL, president, American Institute of Consulting Engineers; L. B. STILLWELL, ex-president, American Motor Engineers; G. R. CHATBURN, president, society for Promotion of Engineering Education; M. E. COOLEY, dean of the College of Engineering, University of Michigan; H. S. DRINKER, president of Lehigh University; F. L. BISHOP, dean of the School of Engineering, University of Pittsburgh; V. KARAPETOFF, Cornell University.

Even in the war-days these ideals of culture were emphasized by the government and the universities. Let me quote from an official document: "The student should, therefore, lay as broad a foundation as he can for whatever his profession, his specialty, is to be. In every case, he needs as his guide a broad knowledge, right habits of thinking, and a free play of intelligence. Even in our present hour of stress, we must remember that education is a preparation for life, and life, if at times something to be sacrificed, is also something to be enjoyed and used widely. And since the university, by its work and its aims and ideals, is devoted not only to practical and professional education, due provision is made for humane studies whose value the war should not allow us to forget, whose worth, indeed, the war perhaps may emphasize."

According to Director Kimball, the head of the College of Engineering in Cornell University, statistics at Cornell University show that students who have entered the

College of Engineering with four years of Latin and three years of German have had the greatest success as engineers.

It is indeed true that the purpose of education is preparation for life, and that only such knowledge has worth as teaches one how to live. But life for us means far more than getting bread and butter enough to enable us to go on getting more bread and butter. What we crave is a human life, a civilized life, a cultural life. Men managed to keep alive long before there was science, literature and art; and they would be able to do it again after a fashion, even if our present civilization were swept away. Merely to keep going a little longer and with fewer bodily aches and pains is not a consummation devoutly to be wished. Man cannot live by bread alone. It would be well to write over the portals of every university in the land the admonition of St. Paul: "And be not conformed to the world but be ye transformed by the renewing of the mind that ye may know the good and the acceptable and the perfect will of God." The man or woman who has not been thus transformed, renewed in mind, and the university which does not infuse into its sons and daughters the spirit that transforms, will do the country little good. If when you go out from these halls, you are caught in the mere machinery of practical living and permit yourselves to be swallowed up by the environment, you will lose your personality, your humanity. A university affords you the opportunity of finding your true self, your big self,—not your selfish, self-seeking little self—so that you may face the world as a master and not as a slave, as a person and not as a mere thing. You must be unwilling to capitulate to the world, the flesh, and the devil: to accept life on any terms. The function of a university is not merely to fit the individual for his calling, but to help him understand his place in nature and society, to enable him to form the right conception of the world and of life, and to aid him in enjoying and preserving and perfecting the achievements of civilization, the cultural treasures of mankind. It is doubtful whether even the true professional ideal can be realized without such culture as it is the function of a university to make possible. At any rate, even a profession is not a trade; it has a social function and it is prostituted when it aims at mere money-getting. It is hard to see why universities should be established at public expense in order to equip certain individuals with the best knowledge and skill for preying upon their fellow creatures. We are not interested in propagating the tribe of commercial physicians, justice-perverting lawyers, lying journalists, and others of their ilk. Such persons are not efficient in the sense in which the highest institutions of learning in the land must strive to make men efficient. No university man is prepared for life, for real living, who conceives his profession as a mere business and, conceiving it thus, limits his interests and activities to practising it in such a mean spirit.

And so, we may say: to educate a human being (*educare*) is to fit him to solve the problem of "complete living," or for realizing the highest good. A man is educated when he understands himself and his physical and psychical environment,

that is, nature and society, when these arouse in him the normal, intellectual, aesthetic ethical feelings, and when he can act upon the world for his own and others' good. Such a person is a cultivated man. How can the desired object be best attained? The individual must know in order that he may feel and act, and he must feel and act in order that he may know. We must train the young to perceive, judge, and reason, analyze and synthesize phenomena, to break his world into pieces and to put it together again in new ways, to use the facts as stepping-stones to something higher. Such knowledge gives us a deeper insight into the workings of the physical and spiritual universe (nature and humanity), and enables us to enjoy and govern it. "Knowledge," as Paulsen says, "that does not make us wiser and more prudent has no value." And remember Goethe's words: "Was man nicht nutzt ist eine schwere Last." Hence, we shall do well to select such studies as have both formal and material value—studies which develop the judgment and furnish useful knowledge. Remember, too, Aristotle's saying: "Education is an ornament in prosperity, and a refuge in adversity."

"Culture" has been defined as that form of soul which would remain if its owner forgot the learning which gave his soul its form. "Education is a fashioning from within." A liberal education liberates the powers of man; thought, feeling, and will. It makes him master over himself, a free man. Consider the analogy of learning to manipulate the body. Just as we develop physical habits, we develop habits of the soul. We speak of persons as by instinct honorable—of the born gentleman. And so, we learn to handle a language; it becomes part and parcel of the mind.

Culture is not identical with intellectual power, reasoning, or the ability to discover facts. Moreover, a cold logical brain, a mere logic-chopping machine, may be without what we call culture. You will, however, meet human beings in life without a college education—indeed, persons who have had few advantages so far as education is concerned—who have fine cultivated souls. They will be men who have a fine sense of aesthetic and ethical values, high standards. One would not regard as cultivated a man of narrow mind, a violent partisan, or a bigot. The man of culture has wide outlooks, deep sympathies; he has a free soul, a soul not mortgaged to plebeian interests.

Another point is worth noting: culture is apt to be self-conscious, in which case, it may become aesthetic prigishness; and there are many who affect a love of beauty. There is nothing sinful in falling into ecstasies in the presence of certain works of art and in just liking others. There is enough of beauty in the natural and human world to satisfy different tastes. And nearly everyone finds and enjoys beauties naively. And of such is, after all, the kingdom of the aesthetic heaven. Indeed, it has been said that the great artists find their satisfaction in the appreciation of the average man. They do not paint and sing for experts.

One can cultivate oneself by learning to appreciate the literature and the fine arts, by contact not only with great works of art but with all the beauties of external nature and human nature. The world is our laboratory here, the world of nature and feeling and of thought.

The cultivated man is one who has resources within himself; like Cicero, he is least alone when he is alone. The soul that cannot, at times, stay at home with itself is to be pitied; there is nothing more depressing than living in a completely empty house. There is a host of great thinkers and poets and artists whom you can summon when you will, whom you may invite as permanent sojourners in your minds and hearts.

And now in conclusion: remember, there can be no intellectual or moral development without hard work and discipline; just as there is no primrose path for the athlete, the soldier, and the artist. The palm cannot be won without the dust of the arena, as the Romans put it. To succeed you must develop stoic qualities—in business and everywhere else. You will have to prove the mettle of your pasture. Here, in this University, lie your great opportunities: lay your foundations on the solid ground and turn your eyes to the stars.



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