I

SOME RETURNS ON SCHOLARSHIP[1]

A PROFESSOR of education, described as unusually human for one of that occupation, addressing a recent London conference, said: "Never run after a bus, a woman, or an educational theory. There will be another one along shortly."

The procession of educational theories is indeed a long one, and goes on forever. It reaches from the first mother to the last survivor of the human race. The phrase, educational theory, is itself relatively modern, but can hardly be peculiar to western civilization. Its Latin half is to this day ambiguous. Is the process one of drawing out or of bringing up? That is to say, does the word education come down to us from the Latin *educere* or from *educare?* As to the word theory, the Greek part of the phrase, a theory was an embassy. The embassy might be on errands either of politics or religion or both, might be fulfilling a public office the object of which was to seek an audience of the Deity and to bring back the word of God, or might be a mission observing conditions or spectacles of nature or of human nature at home or abroad—objectives not unlike those enjoined in the third act of Shakespeare's *Henry the Eighth:*

> Let all the ends thou aim'st at be thy country's,
> Thy God's, and truth's.

But whatever their origin, their evolution, or their current significance, educational theories have made us what

[1] An address before the Rice Institute Chapter of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, March 10, 1937.

we are. We are creatures of them. To relations of this sort we owe our residence in an academic community, while to others similar but differing in kind is due our presence here tonight. We are met under the auspices of an organization which was founded and has been maintained on the support and in support of certain educational theories. And it is in virtue of those theories that you have had bestowed upon you the badge of this society of scholars.

You have thus been singled out as representative scholars of the republic of learning—dominion of reason, experience, and faith. The standards and subjects by which this selection has been determined derive, as I have intimated, from a long line of thinking and theory, tradition and experiment, that goes back as far as the mind of man can run, and brings up right here and now in this institution and in yourselves. What are the returns for you on this investment? Of some of them I wish to speak.

My first return on scholarship is in personal satisfaction. Education is an everlasting debt of one generation to the next. You will soon be called upon to carry your share, your personal share, in meeting a part of that, our common obligation. And the daily discharge of the duty will be a source of perennial satisfaction to you.

It is an inherited debt—this debt to the on-coming generation. Many, many previous payments have been made on it in your own generation. The latter contributions have also served to build up an inheritance for you. Into possession of a portion of that inheritance you have already entered. In fact, that portion has helped to maintain you in this place. One element of your experience here will remain with you inviolable, inalienable, imperishable. I mean the sense of having had your chance. An inheritance of money or of land may pass away tomorrow, but the consciousness

of having had and met your opportunity perishes only with memory itself. So I place first among your satisfactions as scholars this sense of having had your chance, coupled with conscience to pass the chance on in turn to others. And your next joy, I think, is in the love and possession of knowledge, none of it perfect, some of it illusory perhaps, but none the less part and parcel of what the late Professor John B. Bury used to call "the perspective of knowledge."

But the perspective of human knowledge is flanked in all directions by longer vistas of human ignorance: individual ignorance, culminating in the more baffling collective ignorance of mankind. A Latin inscription of this institution says that the greatest enemy of knowledge is ignorance. My own ignorance, for instance, is of several varieties: ignorance of the vast region unknown to any man; ignorance of a great mass of acquired and accumulated human knowledge, of which I know nothing; and ignorance of the realm of the unknowable, a phrase which to my mind means no more and no less than that the realm is still to be stormed and still to be taken by human reason. It is this constant contact with ignorance that spurs the scholar's courage and restrains his judgment. By his courage of conservatism we are led to confidence in him. Of this confidence the scholar, too, is well aware. And that awareness also becomes one of his personal satisfactions in scholarship.

Then there is the sense of power that comes with the mastery of some subject as far as you have gone in it, the cleaning up of some treatise, however short, from cover to cover, the satisfaction in having done a thoroughly good bit of thinking by getting to the bottom of a problem or two, the growing conviction that you can think for yourself and the gratification in finding further proof for it by way of a criticism or judgment of your own later confirmed by compe-

tent authority, the sneaking impression—and this is the best of all—that you yourself might one day be just such an acknowledged competent authority.

Therefore, the consciousness of duty to carry on for the common weal and to pass chance and torch on to others, a sense of gratitude for the love of knowledge and joy in its possession, the restraint upon self and the respect from others which reputation for knowledge secures, the consciousness of knowledge as power for action and of its resourcefulness in leisure — these are some of a scholar's personal satisfactions in scholarship. My judgment as to his supreme satisfaction still stands: it is to speak with the voice of authority. He may sometimes hold that distinction in more than one field of knowledge. For example, I am not a botanist, but I know a Canadian geologist, a French mathematician, and an American jurist, each one of whom is a recognized authority on botany. The first of these examples is of course the least odd of the three, for the very simple reason that there were flowers in geological time, aeons before botanists, geologists, jurists, or mathematicians had appeared on the historical scene.

In the next place, if my first returns on scholarship spring from sources of personal satisfaction, those of my second group arise from the professional practice of it. All that I have said up to this moment, in so far as it is true, applies indiscriminately to all of us, independently of what we are now, and of the business or profession to engagement in which we may be looking forward. And, *a fortiori,* all that I have said fits every line and level of a life of learning. It is a smaller company, however, that I have next in mind—a chosen few, I am obliged to think—who, under a compulsion of spirit that will not let them do other, pursue learning for its own sake, to a highly refined point of precision and perfection.

Now I do not believe that the world owes even a scholar a living. If, on the one hand, the scholar should have private means, all well and good, for he could build his laboratory, buy his library, travel and study to his heart's content. And I think that the scholar's case will always be one of the strongest cases for private property. On the other hand, the scholar who must work for his livelihood, as most scholars must, may follow one of several courses. He may start by taking his chances in a business or professional career with a view to accumulating a competency and to devoting a later period of his life to productive scholarship. Or he may immediately seek and find employment and equipment for study and research in establishments maintained, in increasing numbers, by learned societies, or by state and national governments, or by commercial and industrial corporations, or by private and public philanthropy—establishments all of which may be wholly independent of public and of privately endowed institutions of learning.

But to my way of thinking, he should follow a third course, because in my judgment an institution of learning offers far and away the best prospects to the scholar who means to make the scholar's career his career. I am of this opinion because the priceless element in a university atmosphere is its spirit of disinterested inquiry. The untrammelled free play of that spirit under reason and imagination is attained so fully in no other type of institution yet invented by human ingenuity. We are by nature acquisitive. Few are born with the spirit of detachment. It must be captured in youth. It is caught best at work. Not all who are touched by it persist in it. Students in turn stimulate it. A great teacher and researcher of the nineteenth century said: "My students are my wings; without them I could not fly."

Wings or no wings, I cannot remember a time myself when I did not want to be a scholar. My present employ-

ment put an end to all that, yet at every possible opportunity I am still a student. I have no doubt that many of you are similarly moved and I trust that your ambition may not stop short of a permanent university career. Most men will agree, I think, that an active university career imposes on the scholar obligation: to earn his salary, to advance his science, to train up a few specialists for the succession, and to prepare for citizenship all who come under his tutelage. As thus formulated, the obligation is a fourfold one of which the key points are salary, science, succession, citizenship. The salary, unfortunately, is the least of the scholar's compensations. One reason for this is, perhaps, that early returns in money just after graduation are likely to be better in teaching than in most professions and forms of business. By advancing his science, I mean the positive increasing of knowledge, and I should include interpretations and applications of his subject among desirable additions to knowledge. By training up specialists for the succession, I mean the discipline of the few in liberal and technical training for life-time dedication whole-heartedly to the life of learning for its own rewards, and whatever the sacrifice. For, like the priesthood, the life of learning has its sacrificial vows. I use the phrase "few for the succession" deliberately, because, for example, there might easily be too many mathematicians in any country. And by preparation of the many for the duties of citizenship, I mean affording every one of them some recovery of the past, some understanding of the present, some anticipation of the future—the more of all three the better—for their intelligent and conscientious devotion to the common good of men and nations.

This training for citizenship is, in a democracy, the underlying objective of educational endeavor throughout its entire range, from childhood to youth, maturity, and be-

yond. That objective for the citizenry requires provision for popular education in every community of a democracy. It is an objective of multiple opportunities for the scholar in public service. It has led me to find in public service my third and last category of returns for you on scholarship. That is to say, our three groups may be labelled: personal satisfaction, professional practice, public service—the three categories being in the main mutually inclusive.

Now the inarticulate solitary thinker is a servant of society. "Das Denken ist auch Gottesdienst," exclaimed Hegel to his housekeeper when she complained about the way he spent his Sundays. Hegel, to be sure, was far from being either an inarticulate or a solitary thinker. But I have known scholars whose mere mute presence was a public benediction to any community. And I have known others, more vocal, who were veritable firebrands in engaging public opinion. "God offers to every man the choice between truth and repose. Take which you please—you can never have both." So says Emerson, a wise American man.

But the scholar as citizen and the career man as politician are frequently at loggerheads. And here is one of the reasons: scholarship is a science of the best; politics at best is a science of the second best. The scholar knows no compromise with truth, though even he, awaiting data or generalization, must be content at times with approximation, but avowed and admitted as approximation, to truth. The politician, however high in principle and stable of mind, has continually to compose circumstances and to resort to compromise, simply in order to get things done. "We do," said Menander some twenty-two centuries ago, "We do not what we wish but what we can." Menander perhaps had not, but very well might have had, politicians especially in mind. Nor can the scholar as layman do much better today.

Whether in the capacity of layman or professional, public usefulness for the scholar obtains in some measure under any form of government. In a democracy such public usefulness should be paramount. Far-reaching opportunities for it flow from the democratic doctrine of education for all the people. A monarchy, for example, may or may not encourage an educated citizenry, but in a democracy it is urgent to the utmost, this education of all the people for the responsibilities of citizenship. Quite the loftiest aspect of the matter is, I think, that government of the people, for the people, by the people may elevate every one of its individual members to a status of conscious responsibility for wise and just government. The dignity of this relationship in a democracy is at once a challenge to the scholar and his daily privilege in public service. Nor can he go very far wrong if, with Pindar, the aristocrat, he can say: "Those virtues move my soul which serve the folk." "To be free, to understand, to enjoy," thus an acute thinker has characterized the demands of modern thought and the modern man. That cry, to be free, to understand, to enjoy, is every citizen's human cry. It is a major concern of the scholar alike in personal, professional, and public service.

With a professional scholar these remarks began. With a professional scholar they shall end. He was a geometer. He had studied successfully in several university centers. A learned academy had crowned one of his earliest papers. His prize memoir was followed by substantial contributions to conservative mathematical journals. He was achieving a first-rate reputation, and indeed an international one. He was enriching a new field with ideas which foreign students were finding inviting. His fame seemed all but assured. Suddenly and solemnly, in the full vigor of his prime, he announced to his associates that he was going to devote the

next three years of his life exclusively to contemplating the idea of God. They were amazed. Some of them were amused, and made light of the matter, but I think you might say today that their merriment was misplaced. At any rate, I am of the opinion that secular States and public servants, almost the wide world over, sorely need to recover the idea of God in history. To my mind that idea still affords a clue to the meaning of history, a key to what Condorcet called in another fine and fruitful phrase, *le progrès de l'esprit humain*. The scholar, like the saint, moves by faith as well as sight.

Every now and then, in one field or another, we are told that all the great scholars have passed away. From that thesis I have never ceased to dissent. The great scholars are not all dead, nor are all the great scholars living. There are many, many more great scholars yet to come. May you of this company be of their company.

> Let all the ends thou aim'st at be thy country's,
> Thy God's, and truth's.