

# The Great Conversation

BY ROBERT M. HUTCHINS



Until lately the West has regarded it as self-evident that the road to education lay through great books. No man was educated unless he was acquainted with the masterpieces of his tradition. There never was very much doubt in anybody's mind about which the masterpieces were. They were the books that had endured and that the common voice of mankind called the finest creations, in writing, of the Western mind.

In the course of history, from epoch to epoch, new books have been written that have won their place in the list. Books once thought entitled to belong to it have been superseded; and this process of change will continue as long as men can think and write. It is the task of every generation to reassess the tradition in which it lives, to discard what it cannot use, and to bring into context with the distant and intermediate past the most recent contributions to the Great Conversation. This set of books is the result of an attempt to reappraise and re-embody the tradition of the West for our generation.

The Editors do not believe that any of the social and political changes that have taken place in the last fifty years, or any that now seem imminent, have invalidated or can invalidate the tradition or make it irrelevant for modern men. On the contrary, they are convinced that the West needs to recapture and re-emphasize and bring to bear upon its present problems the wisdom that lies in the works of its greatest thinkers and in the discussion that they have carried on.

This set of books is offered in no antiquarian spirit. We have not seen our task as that of taking tourists on a visit to ancient ruins or to the quaint productions of primitive peoples. We have not thought of providing our readers with hours of relaxation or with an escape from the dreadful cares that are the lot of every man in the second half of the twentieth century after Christ. We are as concerned as anybody else at the headlong plunge into the

Editor's Note: Mr. Hutchins' essay was written for the 1st edition of *Great Books of the Western World* in 1952, and it will be clear to the reader that some of his references to events are dated, but the Editors believe that the basic argument of this essay is as valid today—if not more so—as when it was written.

abyss that Western civilization seems to be taking. We believe that the voices that may recall the West to sanity are those which have taken part in the Great Conversation. We want them to be heard again—not because we want to go back to antiquity, or the Middle Ages, or the Renaissance, or the Eighteenth Century. We are quite aware that we do not live in any time but the present, and, distressing as the present is, we would not care to live in any other time if we could. We want the voices of the Great Conversation to be heard again because we think they may help us to learn to live better now.

We believe that in the passage of time the neglect of these books in the twentieth century will be regarded as an aberration, and not, as it is sometimes called today, a sign of progress. We think that progress, and progress in education in particular, depends on the incorporation of the ideas and images included in this set in the daily lives of all of us, from childhood through old age. In this view the disappearance of great books from education and from the reading of adults constitutes a calamity. In this view education in the West has been steadily deteriorating; the rising generation has been deprived of its birthright; the mess of pottage it has received in exchange has not been nutritious; adults have come to lead lives comparatively rich in material comforts and very poor in moral, intellectual, and spiritual tone.

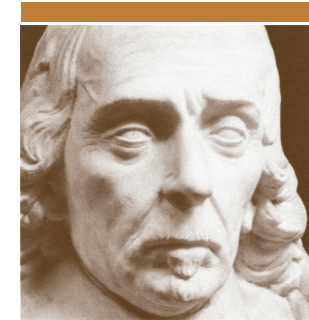
We do not think that these books will solve all our problems. We do not think that they are the only books worth reading. We think that these books shed some light on all our basic problems, and that it is folly to do without any light we can get. We think that these books show the origins of many of our most serious difficulties. We think that the spirit they represent and the habit of mind they teach are more necessary today than ever before. We think that the reader who does his best to understand these books will find himself led to read and helped to understand other books. We think that reading and understanding great books will give him a standard by which to judge all other books.

Though we do not recommend great books as a panacea for our ills, we must admit that we have an exceedingly high opinion of them as an educational instrument. We think of them as the best educational instrument for young people and adults today. By this we do not mean that this particular set is the last word that can be said on the subject. We may have made errors of selection. We hope that this collection may some day be revised in the light of the criticism it will receive. But the idea that liberal education is the education that everybody ought to have, and that the best way to a liberal education in the West is through the greatest works the West has produced, is still, in our view, the best educational idea there is.

Examining the chronological structure of the set, the reader will also note that the Great Conversation covers more than twenty-five centuries. But he may wonder at its apparent termination with the end of the nineteenth century. With the exception of some of Freud's writings, all the other works here assembled were written or published before 1900; and some of Freud's important works were published before that date.

The Editors did not seek to assemble a set of books representative of various periods or countries. Antiquity and the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and modern times, are included in proportion as the great writers of these epochs contributed to the deepening, extension, or enrichment of the tradition of the West. It is worth noting that, though the period from 1500 to 1900 represents less than one-sixth of the total extent of the literary record of the Western tradition, the last four hundred years is represented in this set by more than one-half the volumes of *Great Books of the Western World*.

The Editors did not, in short, allot a certain space to a certain epoch in terms of the amount of time in human history that it consumed. Nor did we arbitrarily allot a certain space to a certain country. We tried to find the most important voices in the Conversation, without regard to the language they spoke. We did encounter some difficulties with language that we thought insurmountable.



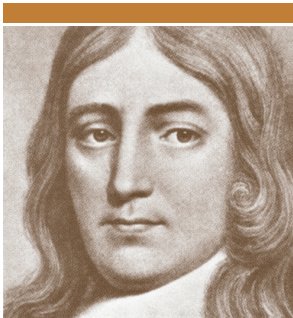
. . . Almost everything we yet possess of note or credit in philosophy, has been transmitted to us through the industry of ancient Greece.

Harvey, *On the Motion of the Heart and Blood in Animals*

Where the excellence of a book depended principally on the excellence of its language, and where no adequate translation could be found or made, we were constrained reluctantly to omit it.

Since the set was conceived of as a great conversation, it is obvious that the books could not have been chosen with any dogma or even with any point of view in mind. In a conversation that has gone on for twenty-five centuries, all dogmas and points of view appear. Here are the great errors as well as the great truths. The reader has to determine which are the errors and which the truths. The task of interpretation and conclusion is his. This is the machinery and life of the Western tradition in the hands of free men.

The conversation presented in this set is peculiar to the West. We believe that everybody, Westerners and Easterners, should understand it, not because it is better than anything the East can show, but because it is important to understand the West. We hope that editors who understand the tradition of the East will do for that part of the world what we have attempted for our own tradition in *Great Books of the Western World* and the *Syntopicon*. With that task accomplished for both the West and the East, it should be possible to put together the common elements in the traditions and to present Great Books of the World. Few things could do as much to advance the unity of mankind.



Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making.

Milton, *Areopagitica*

---

## The Tradition of the West

The tradition of the West is embodied in the Great Conversation that began in the dawn of history and that continues to the present day. Whatever the merits of other civilizations in other respects, no civilization is like that of the West in this respect. No other civilization can claim that its defining characteristic is a dialogue of this sort. No dialogue in any other civilization can compare with that of the West in the number of great works of the mind that have contributed to this dialogue. The goal toward which Western society moves is the Civilization of the Dialogue. The spirit of Western civilization is the spirit of inquiry. Its

dominant element is the *Logos*. Nothing is to remain undiscussed. Everybody is to speak his mind. No proposition is to be left unexamined. The exchange of ideas is held to be the path to the realization of the potentialities of the race.

At a time when the West is most often represented by its friends as the source of that technology for which the whole world yearns and by its enemies as the fountainhead of selfishness and greed, it is worth remarking that, though both elements can be found in the Great Conversation, the Western ideal is not one or the other strand in the Conversation, but the Conversation itself. It would be an exaggeration to say that Western civilization means these books. The exaggeration would lie in the omission of the plastic arts and music, which have quite as important a part in Western civilization as the great productions included in this set. But to the extent to which books can present the idea of a civilization, the idea of Western civilization is here presented.

These books are the means of understanding our society and ourselves. They contain the great ideas that dominate us without our knowing it. There is no comparable repository of our tradition.

To put an end to the spirit of inquiry that has characterized the West it is not necessary to burn the books. All we have to do is to leave them unread for a few generations. On the other hand, the revival of interest in these books from time to time throughout history has provided the West with new drive and creativeness. Great books have salvaged, preserved, and transmitted the tradition on many occasions similar to our own.

The books contain not merely the tradition, but also the great exponents of the tradition. Their writings are models of the fine and liberal arts. They hold before us what Whitehead called “the habitual vision of greatness.” These books have endured because men in every era have been lifted beyond themselves by the inspiration of their example. Sir Richard Livingstone said: “We are tied down, all our days and for the greater part of our days, to the commonplace. That is where contact with great thinkers,

great literature helps. In their company we are still in the ordinary world, but it is the ordinary world transfigured and seen through the eyes of wisdom and genius. And some of their vision becomes our own.”

Until very recently these books have been central in education in the West. They were the principal instrument of liberal education, the education that men acquired as an end in itself, for no other purpose than that it would help them to be men, to lead human lives, and better lives than they would otherwise be able to lead.

The aim of liberal education is human excellence, both private and public (for man is a political animal). Its object is the excellence of man as man and man as citizen. It regards man as an end, not as a means; and it regards the ends of life, and not the means to it. For this reason it is the education of free men. Other types of education or training treat men as means to some other end, or are at best concerned with the means of life, with earning a living, and not with its ends.

The substance of liberal education appears to consist in the recognition of basic problems, in knowledge of distinctions and interrelations in subject matter, and in the comprehension of ideas.

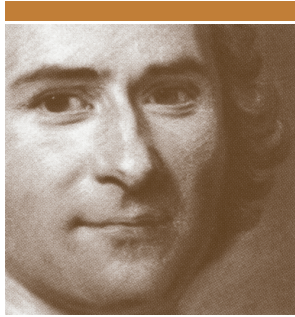
Liberal education seeks to clarify the basic problems and to understand the way in which one problem bears upon another. It strives for a grasp of the methods by which solutions can be reached and the formulation of standards for testing solutions proposed. The liberally educated man understands, for example, the relation between the problem of the immortality of the soul and the problem of the best form of government; he understands that the one problem cannot be solved by the same method as the other, and that the test that he will have to bring to bear upon solutions proposed differs from one problem to the other.

The liberally educated man understands, by understanding the distinctions and interrelations of the basic fields of subject matter, the differences and connections between poetry and history, science and philosophy, theo-



Wisdom is the fruit of a balanced development. It is this balanced growth of individuality which it should be the aim of education to secure.

Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*



Public education . . . is one of the fundamental rules of popular or legitimate government.

Rousseau, *On Political Economy*

retical and practical science; he understands that the same methods cannot be applied in all these fields; he knows the methods appropriate to each.

The liberally educated man comprehends the ideas that are relevant to the basic problems and that operate in the basic fields of subject matter. He knows what is meant by soul, state, God, beauty, and by the other terms that are basic to the discussion of fundamental issues. He has some notion of the insights that these ideas, singly or in combination, provide concerning human experience.

The liberally educated man has a mind that can operate well in all fields. He may be a specialist in one field. But he can understand anything important that is said in any field and can see and use the light that it sheds upon his own. The liberally educated man is at home in the world of ideas and in the world of practical affairs, too, because he understands the relation of the two. He may not be at home in the world of practical affairs in the sense of liking the life he finds about him; but he will be at home in that world in the sense that he understands it. He may even derive from his liberal education some conception of the difference between a bad world and a good one and some notion of the ways in which one might be turned into the other.

The method of liberal education is the liberal arts, and the result of liberal education is discipline in those arts. The liberal artist learns to read, write, speak, listen, understand, and think. He learns to reckon, measure, and manipulate matter, quantity, and motion in order to predict, produce, and exchange. As we live in the tradition, whether we know it or not, so we are all liberal artists, whether we know it or not. We all practice the liberal arts, well or badly, all the time every day. As we should understand the tradition as well as we can in order to understand ourselves, so we should be as good liberal artists as we can in order to become as fully human as we can.

The liberal arts are not merely indispensable; they are unavoidable. Nobody can decide for himself whether he is going to be a human being. The only question open to him

is whether he will be an ignorant, undeveloped one or one who has sought to reach the highest point he is capable of attaining. The question, in short, is whether he will be a poor liberal artist or a good one.

The tradition of the West in education is the tradition of the liberal arts. Until very recently nobody took seriously the suggestion that there could be any other ideal. The educational ideas of John Locke, for example, which were directed to the preparation of the pupil to fit conveniently into the social and economic environment in which he found himself, made no impression on Locke's contemporaries. And so it will be found that other voices raised in criticism of liberal education fell upon deaf ears until about a half-century ago.

This Western devotion to the liberal arts and liberal education must have been largely responsible for the emergence of democracy as an ideal. The democratic ideal is equal opportunity for full human development, and, since the liberal arts are the basic means of such development, devotion to democracy naturally results from devotion to them. On the other hand, if acquisition of the liberal arts is an intrinsic part of human dignity, then the democratic ideal demands that we should strive to see to it that all have the opportunity to attain to the fullest measure of the liberal arts that is possible to each.

The present crisis in the world has been precipitated by the vision of the range of practical and productive art offered by the West. All over the world men are on the move, expressing their determination to share in the technology in which the West has excelled. This movement is one of the most spectacular in history, and everybody is agreed upon one thing about it: we do not know how to deal with it. It would be tragic if in our preoccupation with the crisis we failed to hold up as a thing of value for the world, even as that which might show us a way in which to deal with the crisis, our vision of the best that the West has to offer. That vision is the range of the liberal arts and liberal education. Our determination about the distribution of the fullest measure of these arts and this education will

measure our loyalty to the best in our own past and our total service to the future of the world.

The great books were written by the greatest liberal artists. They exhibit the range of the liberal arts. The authors were also the greatest teachers. They taught one another. They taught all previous generations, up to a few years ago. The question is whether they can teach us. To this question we now turn.

---

## Modern Times

Until recently great books were central in liberal education; but liberal education was limited to an elite. So great books were limited to an elite and to those few of the submerged classes who succeeded in breaking into them in spite of the barriers that society threw up around them. Where anybody bothered to defend this exclusion, it was done on the basis that only those with exceptional intelligence and leisure could understand these books, and that only those who had political power needed to understand them.

As the masses were admitted to political activity, it was assumed that, though they must be educated, they could not be educated in this way. They had to learn to read the newspaper and to write a business letter and to make change; but how could they be expected to study Plato or Dante or Newton? All that they needed to know about great writers could be translated for them in textbooks that did not suffer from the embarrassment of being either difficult or great.

The people now have political power and leisure. If they have not always used them wisely, it may be because they have not had the kind of education that would enable them to do so.

It is not argued that education through great books and the liberal arts was a poor education for the elite. It is argued that times have changed and that such an education would be a poor education for anybody today, since it is

outmoded. It is remote from real life and today's problems. Many of the books were written when men held slaves. Many were written in a prescientific and preindustrial age. What can they have to say to us, free, democratic citizens of a scientific, industrial era?

This is a kind of sociological determinism. As economic determinism holds that all activity is guided and regulated by the conditions of production, so sociological determinism claims that intellectual activity, at least, is always relative to a particular society, so that, if the society changes in an important way, the activity becomes irrelevant. Ideas originating in one state of society can have no bearing on another state of society. If they seem to have a bearing, this is only seeming. Ideas are the rationalizations

Sir Isaac Newton



of the social conditions that exist at any given time. If we seek to use in our own time the ideas of another, we shall deceive ourselves, because by definition these ideas have no application to any other time than that which produced them.

History and common sense explode sociological determinism, and economic determinism, too. There is something called man on this earth. He wrestles with his problems and tries to solve them. These problems change from epoch to epoch in certain respects; they remain the same in others. What is the good life? What is a good state? Is there a God? What is the nature and destiny of man? Such questions and a host of others persist because man persists, and they will persist as long as he does. Through the ages great men have written down their discussion of these persistent questions. Are we to disdain the light they offer us on the ground that they lived in primitive, far-off times? As someone has remarked, "The Greeks could not broadcast the Aeschylean tragedy; but they could write it."

This set of books explodes sociological determinism, because it shows that no age speaks with a single voice. No society so determines intellectual activity that there can be no major intellectual disagreements in it. The conservative and the radical, the practical man and the theoretician, the idealist and the realist will be found in every society, many of them conducting the same kind of arguments that are carried on today. Although man has progressed in many spectacular respects, I suppose it will not be denied that he is today worse off in many respects, some of them more important than the respects in which he has improved. We should not reject the help of the sages of former times. We need all the help we can get.

The chief exponent of the view that times have changed and that our conception of the best education must change with them is that most misunderstood of all philosophers of education, John Dewey. It is one of the ironies of fate that his followers who have misunderstood him have carried all before them in American education; whereas the plans he proposed have never been tried. The



John Dewey

notion that is perhaps most popular in the United States, that the object of education is to adjust the young to their environment, and in particular to teach them to make a living, John Dewey roundly condemned; yet it is usually advanced in his name.

Dewey was first of all a social reformer. He could not advocate adjustment to an environment the brutality and injustice of which repelled him. He believed in his own conception of liberal education for all and looked upon any kind of training directed to learning a trade, solely to make a living at it, as narrowing and illiberal. He would especially repudiate those who seek to differentiate among the young on the basis of their capacity in order to say that only some are capable of acquiring a liberal education, in Dewey's conception of it or any other. . .

*Democracy and Education* was written before the assembly line had achieved its dominant position in the in-

dustrial world and before mechanization had depopulated the farms of America. The signs of these processes were already at hand; and Dewey saw the necessity of facing the social problems they would raise. One of these is the humanization of work. His book is a noble, generous effort to solve this and other social problems through the educational system. Unfortunately, the methods he proposed would not solve these problems; they would merely destroy the educational system.

The humanization of work is one of the most baffling issues of our time. We cannot hope to get rid of work altogether. We cannot say that we have dealt adequately with work when we have urged the prolongation of leisure.

Whatever work there is should have as much meaning as possible. Wherever possible, workmen should be artists; their work should be the application of knowledge or science and known and enjoyed by them as such. They should, if possible, know what they are doing, why what they are doing has the results it has, why they are doing it, and what constitutes the goodness of the things produced. They should understand what happens to what they produce, why it happens in that way, and how to improve what happens. They should understand their relations to others cooperating in a given process, the relation of that process to other processes, the pattern of them all as constituting the economy of the nation, and the bearing of the economy on the social, moral, and political life of the nation and the world. Work would be humanized if understanding of all these kinds were in it and around it.

To have these kinds of understanding the man who works must have a good mind. The purpose of education is to develop a good mind. Everybody should have equal access to the kind of education most likely to develop such a mind and should have it for as long as it takes to acquire enough intellectual excellence to fix once and for all the vision of the continuous need for more and more intellectual excellence.

This is the educational path to the humanization of work. The man who acquires some intellectual excellence

and intends to go on acquiring more will, to borrow a phrase from Dewey, “reconstruct and reorganize his experience.” We need have few fears that he will not be able to learn how to make a living. In addition to performing this indispensable task, he will inquire critically about the kind of life he leads while making a living. He will seek to understand the manner in which the life of all is affected by the way he and his fellow workers are making a living. He will develop all the meaning there is in his work and go on to see to it that it has more and better meaning.

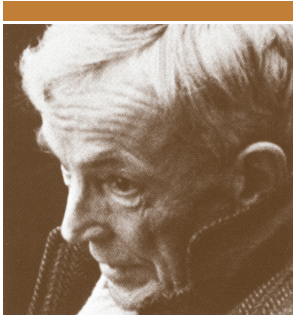
This set of books is offered not merely as an object upon which leisure may be expended, but also as a means to the humanization of work through understanding.

---

...Those who receive with most pains and difficulty, remember best; every new thing they learn, being, as it were, burnt and branded in on their minds.

Plutarch, *Lives*





It is indeed rather astonishing how little practical value scientific knowledge has for ordinary men, how dull and commonplace such of it as has value is, and how its value seems almost to vary inversely to its reputed utility.

Hardy, *A Mathematician's Apology*

---

## Experimental Science

The Great Conversation began before the beginnings of experimental science. But the birth of the Conversation and the birth of science were simultaneous. The earliest of the pre-Socratics were investigating and seeking to understand natural phenomena; among them were men who used mathematical notions for this purpose. Even experimentation is not new; it has been going on for hundreds of years. But faith in the experiment as an exclusive method is a modern manifestation. The experimental method has won such clear and convincing victories that it is now regarded in some quarters not only as the sole method of building up scientific knowledge, but also as the sole method of obtaining knowledge of any kind.

Thus we are often told that any question that is not answerable by the empirical methods of science is not really answerable at all, or at least not by significant and verifiable statements. Exceptions may be made with regard to the kinds of questions mathematicians or logicians answer by their methods. But all other questions must be submitted to the methods of experimental research or empirical inquiry.

If they are not answerable by these methods, they are the sort of questions that should never have been asked in the first place. At best they are questions we can answer only by guesswork or conjecture; at worst they are meaningless or, as the saying goes, nonsensical questions. Genuinely significant problems, in contrast, get their meaning in large part from the scientific operations of observation, experiment, and measurement by which they can be solved;

and the solutions, when discovered by these methods, are better than guesswork or opinion. They are supported by fact. They have been tested and are subject to further verification.

We are told furthermore that the best answers we can obtain by the scientific method are never more than probable. We must free ourselves, therefore, from the illusion that, outside of mathematics and logic, we can attain necessary and certain truth. Statements that are not mathematical or logical formulae may look as if they were necessarily or certainly true, but they only look like that. They cannot really be either necessary or certain. In addition, if they have not been subjected to empirical verification, they are, far from being necessarily true, not even established as probable. Such statements can be accepted provisionally, as working assumptions or hypotheses, if they are acceptable at all. Perhaps it is better, unless circumstances compel us to take another course, not to accept such statements at all.

Consider, for example, statements about God's existence or the immortality of the soul. These are answers to questions that cannot be answered—one way or the other—by the experimental method. If that is the only method by which probable and verifiable knowledge is attainable, we are debarred from having knowledge about God's existence or the immortality of the soul. If modern man, accepting the view that he can claim to know only what can be demonstrated by experiment or verified by empirical research, still wishes to believe in these things, he must acknowledge that he does so by religious faith or by the exercise of his will to believe; and he must be prepared to be regarded in certain quarters as hopelessly superstitious.

It is sometimes admitted that many propositions that are affirmed by intelligent people, such as that democracy is the best form of government or that world peace depends upon world government, cannot be tested by the method of experimental science. But it is suggested that this is simply because the method is still not fully devel-



David Hume

oped. When our use of the method matures, we shall find out how to employ it in answering every genuine question.

Since many propositions in the Great Conversation have not been arrived at by experiment or have not been submitted to empirical verification, we often hear that the Conversation, though perhaps interesting to the antiquarian as setting forth the bizarre superstitions entertained by “thinkers” before the dawn of experimental science, can have no relevance for us now, when experimental science and its methods have at last revealed these superstitions for what they are. We are urged to abandon the reactionary notion that the earlier voices in the Conversation are even now saying something worth listening to, and supplicated to place our trust in the experimental method as the only source of valid or verifiable answers to questions of every sort.

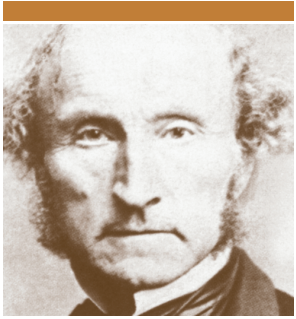
One voice in the Great Conversation itself announces this modern point of view. In the closing paragraph of his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, David Hume writes: “When we run over libraries, persuaded of these

principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume . . . let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.”

The books that Hume and his followers, the positivists of our own day, would commit to burning or, what is the same, to dismissal from serious consideration, do not reflect ignorance or neglect of Hume’s principles. Those books, written after as well as before Hume, argue the case against the kind of positivism that asserts that everything except mathematics and experimental science is sophistry and illusion. They state and defend propositions quite opposite to those of Hume.

The Great Conversation, in short, contains both sides of the issue that in modern times is thought to have a most critical bearing on the significance of the Great Conversation itself. Only an unashamed dogmatist would dare to assert that the issue has been finally resolved now in favor of the view that, outside of logic or mathematics, the method of modern science is the *only* method to employ in seeking knowledge. The dogmatist who made this assertion would have to be more than unashamed. He would have to blind himself to the fact that his own assertion was not established by the experimental method, nor made as an indisputable conclusion of mathematical reasoning or of purely logical analysis.

With regard to this issue about the scientific method, which has become central in our own day, the contrary claim is not made for the Great Conversation. It would be equally dogmatic to assert that the issue has been resolved in favor of the opposite point of view. What can be justly claimed, however, is that the great books ably present both sides of the issue and throw light on aspects of it that are darkly as well as dogmatically treated in contemporary discussion.



Is it not almost a self-evident axiom, that the State should require and compel the education, up to a certain standard, of every human being who is born its citizen?

J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*

The rise of experimental science has not made the Great Conversation irrelevant. Experimental science is a part of the Conversation. As Étienne Gilson has remarked, “our science is a part of our humanism” as “the science of Pericles’ time was a part of Greek humanism.” Science is itself part of the Great Conversation. In the Conversation we find science raising issues about knowledge and reality. In the light of the Conversation we can reach a judgment about the question in dispute: How many valid methods of inquiry are there?

Because of experimental science we now know a very large number of things about the natural world of which our predecessors were ignorant. In this set of books we can observe the birth of science, applaud the development of the experimental technique, and celebrate the triumphs it has won. But we can also note the limitations of the method and mourn the errors that its misapplication has caused. We can distinguish the outlines of those great persistent problems that the method of experimental natural science may never solve and find the clues to their solutions offered by other disciplines and other methods.

---

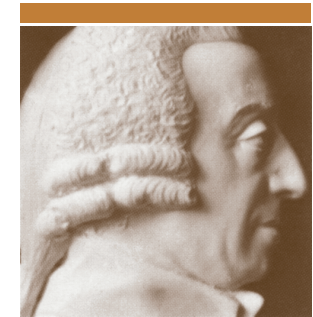
Education for All

Even more important than the dogma of scholarship in keeping people from the books is the dogma of individual differences. This is one of the basic dogmas of American education. It runs like this: all men are different; therefore, all men require a different education; therefore, anybody who suggests that their education should be in any respect the same has ignored the fact that all men are different; therefore, nobody should suggest that everybody should read some of the same books; some people should read some books, some should read others. This dogma has gained such a hold on the minds of American educators that you will now often hear a college president boast that his college has no curriculum. Each student has a course of study framed, or “tailored” is the usual word, to meet his own individual needs and interests.

We should not linger long in discussing the question of whether a student at the age of eighteen should be permitted to determine the content of his education. As we tend to underrate the intelligence of the young, we tend to overrate their experience and the significance of the expression of interests and needs on the part of those who are inexperienced. Educators ought to know better than their pupils what an education is. If educators do not, they have wasted their lives. The art of teaching consists in large part of interesting people in things that ought to interest them, but do not. The task of educators is to discover what an education is and then to invent the methods of interesting their students in it.

But I do not wish to beg the question. The question, in effect, is this: Is there any such thing as “an education”? The answer that is made by the devotees of the dogma of individual differences is No; there are as many different educations as there are different individuals; it is “authoritarian” to say that there is any education that is necessary, or even suitable, for every individual.

So Bertrand Russell once said to me that the pupil in school should study whatever he liked. I asked whether this was not a crime against the pupil. Suppose a boy did not like Shakespeare. Should he be allowed to grow up without



In the universities the youth neither are taught, nor always can find any proper means of being taught, the sciences which it is the business of those incorporated bodies to teach.

Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*

knowing Shakespeare? And, if he did, would he not look back upon his teachers as cheats who had defrauded him of his cultural heritage? Lord Russell replied that he would require a boy to read one play of Shakespeare; if he did not like it, he should not be compelled to read any more.

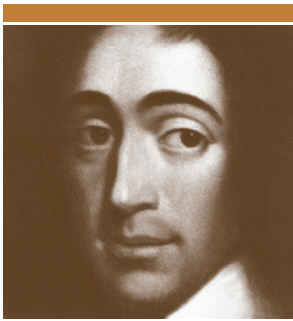
I say that Shakespeare should be a part of the education of everybody. The point at which he is introduced into the course of study, the method of arousing interest in him, the manner in which he is related to the problems of the present may vary as you will. But Shakespeare should be there because of the loss of understanding, because of the impoverishment, that results from his absence. The comprehension of the tradition in which we live and our ability to communicate with others who live in the same tradition and to interpret our tradition to those who do not live in it are drastically affected by the omission of Shakespeare from the intellectual and artistic experience of any of us.

If any common program is impossible, if there is no such thing as an education that everybody ought to have, then we must admit that any community is impossible. All men are different; but they are also the same. As we must all become specialists, so we must all become men. In view of the ample provision that is now made for the training of specialists, in view of the divisive and disintegrative effects of specialism, and in view of the urgent need for unity and community, it does not seem an exaggeration to say that the present crisis calls first of all for an education that shall emphasize those respects in which men are the same, rather than those in which they are different. The West needs an education that draws out our common humanity rather than our individuality. Individual differences can be taken into account in the methods that are employed and in the opportunities for specialization that may come later.

In this connection we might recall the dictum of Rousseau: "It matters little to me whether my pupil is intended for the army, the church, or the law. Before his parents chose a calling for him, nature called him to be a man. . . When he leaves me, he will be neither a magistrate, a soldier, nor a priest; he will be a man."

If there is an education that everybody should have, how is it to be worked out? Educators are dodging their responsibility if they do not make the attempt; and I must confess that I regard the popularity of the dogma of individual differences as a manifestation of a desire on the part of educators to evade a painful but essential duty. The Editors of this set believe that these books should be central in education. But if anybody can suggest a program that will better accomplish the object they have in view, they will gladly embrace him and it.

---



Minds, nevertheless,  
are not conquered by  
arms, but by love and  
generosity.

Spinoza, *Ethics*

---

## The Next Great Change

Since education is concerned with the future, let us ask ourselves what we know positively about the future.

We know that all parts of the world are getting closer together in terms of the mechanical means of transportation and communication. We know that this will continue. The world is going to be unified, by conquest or consent.

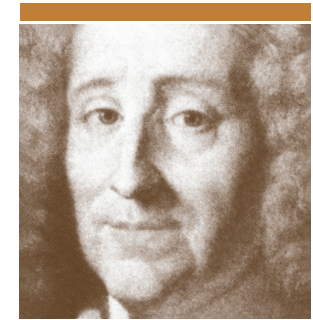
We know that the fact that all parts of the world are getting closer together does not by itself mean greater unity or safety in the world. It may mean that we shall all go up in one great explosion.

We know that there is no defense against the most destructive of modern weapons. Both the victor and the defeated will lose the next war. All the factors that formerly protected this country, geographical isolation, industrial strength, and military power, are now obsolete.

We know that the anarchy of competing sovereign states must lead to war sooner or later. Therefore we must have world law, enforced by a world organization, which must be attained through world cooperation and community.

We know that it will be impossible to induce all men to agree on all matters. The most we can hope for is to induce all men to be willing to discuss all matters instead of shooting one another about some matters. A civilization in which all men are compelled to agree is not one in

which we would care to live. Under such circumstances one world would be worse than many; for in many worlds there is at least the chance of escape from one to another. The only civilization in which a free man would be willing to live is one that conceives of history as one long conversation leading to clarification and understanding. Such a civilization presupposes communication; it does not require agreement.



The climate which influences one nation to take pleasure in being communicative, makes it also delight in change . . .

Montesquieu, *Spirit of Laws*, XIX, 8