

CHALLENGE TO EDUCATION

MATHIAS CAIN, O.P.



STORM is brewing in educational centers today. The effectiveness of our present educational system has been challenged by some of our foremost educators, not the least of whom is Robert Hutchins, President of Chicago University. His protest has been registered in book form under the title *The Higher Learning in America*.¹

This article is not an apology for Doctor Hutchins' book. His book needs no defense. Neither is this article congratulatory. Congratulations are not due to a man because he gives expression to a palpable fact. But this article is an expression of relief, primarily because Doctor Hutchins has challenged the present philosophy of education, secondly, because the challenge has come from one who cannot be accused of bias, and thirdly, because Doctor Hutchins has proposed a salutary remedy for the ineffectiveness of American educational institutions.

The present philosophy of education has been challenged by Doctor Hutchins not because of the gigantic strides which have been made in scientific achievement. His indictment is not leveled against actual accomplishments in art or science but against the ineptitude of our educational systems to produce really educated men.

Chief among the causes which prevent schools from producing educated men is the one known as departmentalism. Curriculums have been divided into autonomous units. Each unit aims at preparing every member on its enrollment for a job, and aims at molding some of the members into specialists. Certainly it is not wrong for any department to prepare its clientele for earning a livelihood. Likewise, it is not wrong for a department to encourage specialization and research. But it is a great wrong for any department to permit its men to depart with the idea that their branch of learning is absolutely independent of every other branch. It is a greater wrong when graduates are permitted to depart without having been taught to think. And it is tragically wrong that our educational institutions do not ground all students in the norms of right morality. Any educational

¹ Yale University Press, New Haven, 1936.

method which does not teach men to think correctly and to live morally is not really an educational method. It is a pseudo-educational method and the one commonly in vogue at our secular institutions of learning in this country. The very utmost that a pseudo-educational method can produce is a half-baked intellectualism crowned by degrees as meaningless as royal insignia sewed onto the sweater of a lap dog.

Doctor Hutchins in challenging the present philosophy of education cannot be accused of bias. Had the sum and substance of his book been proposed by a Catholic educator it would have been airily dismissed as the carping of one wedded to a system of theology. Had the content of his book been projected by an educator of considerably lesser academic status it might be discounted as a verbal ensemble of jealousy issuing from an underdog in the educational game. And Doctor Hutchins is not a demagogue. The sincerity of his challenge is evident from the character of the remedy he proposes—a remedy so compatible with the make-up of a rational creature. It is evident, too, from his fearlessness in facing the storm of vituperation which must come upon him from the champions of the present educational disorder. Even before the accusation of bias can be raised he is exonerated.

The remedy proposed by Doctor Hutchins is one which he labels *General Education*. More specifically he advocates that students beginning the junior year should study metaphysics, natural sciences, and social sciences. These three he says "are the subject matter of the higher learning."² Metaphysics is the science of first principles that is, the science of those fundamental truths underlying all knowledge. "The student would study the social sciences, which are the practical sciences, dealing with the relations of man and man. He would study natural science, which is the science of man and nature. It is clear that they (the three sciences) deal with the same propositions and the same facts, but with different ultimate references. The student would study them without any vocational aim; that is, the subject matter would be the same for those who were planning to enter a learned profession and those who were not. The study would not proceed from the most recent observations back to first principles, but from first principles to whatever recent observations were significant in understanding them."³ Doctor Hutchins' purpose in advocating that these three sciences be imposed upon all students is not iconoclastic in the sense that he would demolish research and spe-

² *The Higher Learning in America*. p. 107.

³ *ibid.*, p. 106.

cialization. Any such destruction would be farthest from his mind. The real purpose of his plan is his desire to see our educational systems shaken to their rotten depths and rehabilitated until they glow with that vitality which springs from only one source—sound philosophy of education.

There is not and there cannot be a sound philosophy of education that is not based upon sound philosophy of life. And no philosophy of life can be sound if it is not based upon sound philosophy. Philosophy in turn is not sound, in fact it is not even philosophy, if it excludes Metaphysics which is the science of the whole of reality. To show man his place in the whole of reality and to direct him how to act, surrounded as he is by the rest of reality, is the fundamental reason for the existence of this normative science called education. The fulfillment of this twofold reason for the existence of education is a task incumbent upon educators—not an arbitrary task, but an obligatory one. Since among the purely human sciences there is only one, namely, Metaphysics, which proposes and defends the principles whereby man may be properly allocated in the cosmic reality, it is obvious that educators are not at liberty to repudiate Metaphysics. Those educators who outlaw Metaphysics and bar it from its rightful position in purely human education cut the ground from under their own feet. Moreover, they leave themselves wide open to the irrefutable charge that if they are anything at all they are pseudo-educators perhaps, but certainly not educators.

Doctor Hutchins recognizes the supremacy of Metaphysics and makes that science the corner stone of his *General Education*. Provided the Metaphysics he calls upon is not a pseudo-Metaphysics, and provided his *General Education* includes a system of ethics grounded on the principles of Metaphysics, then there is a ray of hope in the educational field, for *General Education* will remove the danger of the horrible error occasioned by incisive departmentalism because it will indicate to students that the data which they isolate in thought lie together in reality and are interwoven.

Generally speaking, progress consists in pushing ahead, but towards a definite goal; in this question of higher learning progress will be made by first going back. Our higher learning no longer has in view the one and only true objective of higher learning. It is lost; it is floundering about aimlessly; soon it will fall victim to that weariness which is unto death. Retreat is urgent. Doctor Hutchins does not demand a disgraceful and demoralizing retreat. He asks merely that the higher learning go back to the point of departure from whence the true objective of higher learning can be seen. Doctor

Hutchins has already retreated. He has arrived at higher learning's point of departure, Metaphysics. He sees the true objective of the higher learning—it must teach men not merely to count, it must teach them to think; it must teach them to live morally. The way of progress lies before him.

MEDITATION IN COUPLETS

PHILIP HYLAND, O.P.

(Gethsemane):

He agrees to the price in the Garden, apart,
Though payment demands He break open His heart.

(Mount Calvary):

But now, buying by dying, He fearfully moans—
So much of His blood will be spilled upon stones!