

The Humanities in Theory and Practice

The function of the humanities is to make the individual a citizen of the world in matters of the spirit - to create within him his own forms of mental, emotional, and spiritual freedom. Ways of helping him toward this freedom are by giving understanding of the human spirit, past and present, and of himself. The results from such help are seen and felt in greater powers of cultural appreciation and of self-expression.

In every generation the meaning of the past must be re-created for us by men of knowledge and imagination beyond the ordinary. If these men study the past to become knowers, not interpreters, we get antiquarians. When they study in order to transmit its values, they may inspire others to emulate or at least to appreciate that which has fresh meaning for their own time. Such transmutation and transmission is the function of the informed critic. He contributes to our mental, emotional, and spiritual freedom by keeping alive a sense of values. If a good critic, he increases our power of appreciation. If a great one, he may inspire some few of us to creative activity.

For normal growth of emotional and spiritual powers, every individual needs informed critics suited to his own age and state of development - as guides, not as masters. Child or man, he must protect himself or be protected by others against any mechanical control of his spiritual freedom. This means, in school years, the chance to get relief from abstract subject-matter by handling real matter in the workshop or by creating something in other ways than by using of hands on material

things. Today the child, like the adult, must on his own account set up a steady resistance against every form of communication that imposes formulae on his freedom for thought or self-expression. At all age levels we are assailed by masses of print, sound film, broadcast, and advertising that strive to mechanize our emotional responses, each as capable of establishing within us its own brand of syndicated emotion as a special variety of syndicated opinion.

Obviously today you and I require more than informed critics and known resources, within and without, to bring us spiritual freedom. We must develop a real power of resistance and of selection if we are to feel and to believe This instead of That.

It needs no saying that the humanities touch every level of human activity and that they affect every human condition above the one of mere subsistence. What to do in order that they shall have fullest effect on this generation and those ahead? With the Boards, as with individuals, this is a matter for choice. Mere choice does not imply having the best solution; choices should change, as they have in the past. Choosing certain lines of action of itself gives meaning to the whole, by setting standards of performance or by raising the level of cultural interests among particular groups.

In the Board program, Flexner began at the easiest point - with the status quo in leading American universities. After taking

advice from outstanding humanists, he advised the Board to turn back to them a considerable sum of money for free administration. A few universities were chosen, discriminately, and the American Council of Learned Societies was assigned the work of dealing equably with all through its general grants. His only directed grants were such as the \$75,000 subsidy for Lowe on paleography or backing the Agora excavation. How was this program a credit to us? In having a sense of magnitude. In what way a discredit? By buttressing scholasticism and antiquarianism in our universities. The full weight of this program was behind the elder statesmen, so far as its open tactics appeared. But the idea of a new humanities was at work before 1929, and partly because of Board money. Scholars who had worked individually began co-operation on group projects and they at times also encouraged younger men. I like his faith in excellence and in first-rate men, but he asked nothing openly of them beyond a refinement of the scholarly traditions of Europe.

To criticize my own program for the five-year period, even by indirection, is not easy. Without attempting historical accounting, I shall say what might develop out of current operations.

The United States

1. To the strongholds of humanistic work, the better universities, the Foundation needs admission on friendly terms if it is to give permanence to its efforts. A sudden ending in 1929 of its benevolent general support to the status quo would have been unfriendly. The change of direction was salutary and without undue hardship. After patching up a few projects not adequately handled in liquidation, we are now on good

terms with former beneficiaries. Though the ACLS suffered more than the university units under withdrawal of Foundation project funds, it is ready to co-operate at all times and in its 1937 meeting limited its field of activity by specifying special interests for the immediate future. With that general program of stimulation behind us, we should go on helping to bring into university recognition some humanistic interests vastly needed for general education and for American competence in world affairs. Certain evident needs are real teaching of all the arts, discrimination between teaching and research needs of our institutions, cultivation of undeveloped fields - our own culture, the other Americas, the Far East.

2. For the widening of public appreciation, there is need to assist universities and other free institutions in contributing more fully to public service. About half of the current program for the humanities is directed toward this purpose through work with such media as drama, film, and radio, and through such community institutions as libraries and museums. All these agencies have international possibilities as well as functional value in their American settings.

International

1. The program, internationally, is exemplified in what the Foundation has done to promote mutual understanding between China and the United States. We have thus far used the convenient, practical implements of library service and language training. I have no doubt that these activities soon can be discontinued, at least in their present form, as is the case with the current library program for Europe. Home resources will back the work, and the men trained in new disciplines will

produce followers. Other means of cultural interchange may then be put to use in the Humanities program.

The Chinese-American items in the Humanities program also point toward ways of action equally useful in Japan and Latin-America. It would be useless to predict exactly what should be our ways of development. The prescription is to discover what each country needs and to start providing it, if possible with the accompaniment of something taken that is similarly appreciated and useful to us or other countries. One error in missionary endeavor may have been ignorance of cross-fertilization; at any rate, in cultural relations trading is essential to understanding and good will, not "selling" ideas or outright giving in the spirit of charity.

The Latin-American countries clearly demand the use of specialists with an understanding of their national characteristics. Cultural missions south of the Rio Grande have had hard going when drawn in North American terms. Those nations have the right to expect such study of their national cultures as we have given those of Europe, though with less general transmission of what is learned because less belongs in our own tradition. But the placing of Latin-American nations in the world family is one of our untouched cultural tasks, to be thought of seriously when once we understand one another. As for the nations of the Far East, simple security dictates the learning of what they think and believe.

All our methods of work in the United States and internationally can be determined by what we find to do with methods agreeable

to all the participants. I assume that the usual distinction of developed and backward countries is as sound with relation to cultural interests as for public health. We need to deal with physical areas and with varied cultural levels in terms of needs and opportunities. For example, we may help other agencies to release radio and film for non-commercial service to society. With microfilm we may help men move human records from one quarter of the world to any other as did the printing press in freeing mankind from dependence on the monastic scriptorium for copies of manuscripts. Or we may push ahead the acceptance of a world-wide auxiliary language. At the higher reaches of the humanistic disciplines, also, we may wisely encourage exhaustive studies by specialists of problems that have no apparent practical applications tomorrow. Some of these byways will lead to open roads - as the decipherment of the Rosetta Stone, thirty years after Napoleon turned it up in the Nile, came about through one man's persistence. For the scholar, we should have the question, What for? but not in the absolute sense of use-on-delivery tomorrow. For the man concerned with mass education, we should have other kinds of question, such as How long will its effect last? and Is there a person or agency equal to the immediate job?

As noted above, these days call for resistance to the power of instruments that may dominate and destroy our sensibilities. Preventive work is to be done, some prophylactic in character. But I should be sure that our efforts would be fruitless if they did not produce personnel intent on accomplishing something for society's advantage. The same qualification is required for general service as for scholarly investigation; there must be a man at it who is secretly possessed by an ideal. It is our

duty to recognize him when seen, or to help create him.

At the moment we are getting some good results just below the commercial "broadcast band" in drama, film, and radio. While doing this, we must work with fundamental materials of human thought and feeling whenever we discover avenues of entry into unknown countries. The Humanities need a "program," but for them "tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new" is more than a poetic phrase. This is a way of expressing the obvious - that their function is to give freedom to spirit and imagination. Our business is to see that the work gets results in chosen areas and then starts anew with fresh purposes appropriate to the time and the human need.

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