

What Good is Knowledge Without Wisdom?

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Many educational theorists assume that a multicultural understanding of the world is the right base for an educational system. I beg to differ. A generic, secular education can only function when the cultural base is strong. As it weakens we can predict that the secular education system will fail, as it is doing in Canada at present.

Even Christians seem often to be confused about what is at stake. What we believe we know informs what we will believe, which in turn determines what we will do and, perhaps more importantly, what we will not do. For most students education is not about these deeper questions, but simply about the acquisition of information, especially information that is practical and relevant to earning a living. T.S. Eliot understood this mindset and its growing dominance when he wrote,

“Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information? It is for lack of wisdom, not lack of information, that the people perish.”

Today, as I was teaching a fourth year class in the science faculty, I learned that in the last three years the students had written an average of one essay! They had taken lots of examinations, which most of them had passed with distinction. The educationalists would be proud of those examinations: they were valid, objective, specific and of appropriate sensitivity in the educational jargon. However, they did not in any way encourage the joy of learning.

WHAT IS IMPORTANT?

Wisdom requires that we understand the world in ways that lead to appropriate decisions about what is most important in life. Wisdom is expressed in the African concept that the death of the old people is the greatest tragedy for the village. The death of the young is a personal tragedy for the young but not for the village. Why? Because when the elderly die much wisdom is lost and the fabric of the village has a large rent in it. When the young die the damage to the village's store of wisdom is minimal.

Those with little wisdom often achieve knowledge. They know their subject encyclopaedically, whether it is the fossils of the Columbian Shales or the works of Macrobius, but only a fool would ask their advice on any other subject. Information is the prime feature of our age. Undigested, ill-understood, often incorrect statements are culled from sundry sources on the internet without any idea of how to sift the good from the bad and the indifferent. Would any young science students you know be able to tell whether what they are being taught is reliable or not? I guarantee they will struggle. They may say that it is experimentally based, but they did not do the experiments and often the experiments they do perform they do not believe. They “adjust” their results to get the “right” answer. But when told that they believe on the basis of authority they are horrified.

SUCCUMB TO TEMPTATIONS

For those scientists who are purely utilitarian, a great deal can hang on how many papers they publish. Many are tempted and many succumb to the temptation to fabricate the necessary data. If the results are good enough to deceive the peer

reviewers but not important enough to be repeated, they are promoted. If they are found out – a fairly low risk – they are dismissed. For an atheistic utilitarian only concerned about the transmission of his genes to the next generation, it is a simple problem of probabilities. But science cannot long survive if too many people follow his lead. We may be slow to work out the logic of our moral positions but the inevitable consequences slowly show up. The moral and intellectual norms of a culture determine what is possible.

For example, an animistic society has a different rationality. The world is understood as controlled by local evil spirits. This understanding has great explanatory power for the apparently random disasters of infant death, crop failure, earthquake and flood but it is utterly incapable of supporting science. To the animist, life is a series of uncontrollable and mainly disastrous experiences – “nasty, brutish and short,” in Hobbes’s memorable phrase. Noble disdain of nature or attempts to placate the evil powers are both rational, but neither leads to any understanding of nature in the modern sense, which is

predicated on the belief that underneath the apparent chaos order exists. To Christians this is a logical consequence of their theology of God.

Many Canadians who are losing in the educational race are neo-pagans without any sense that their education should be coherent and part of a unitary concept of truth. They have more in common with animists than with their great-grandparents. An education worthy of the name must make the student see these realities in ways that become fixed in their minds. They must see that truth is to be pursued for its own sake. But that can only be a way of living if we are altruistic. Unfortunately, the experience of humanity throughout history – at least since Cain and Abel – suggests that altruism does not come naturally to us. The alternative motivation is the “fear of the Lord.” This ancient insight limits the human factor and opens eyes to see the great truths that underlie our existence. Christian education, at its best, provides students with a worldview that acknowledges the ultimate goodness of the creator, even as it seeks to understand and explain the wonderful complexity of the natural universe.

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