

## The Mastery of Facts—Learning How to Think *by J. Gresham Machen*

A marked characteristic of the present day is a lamentable intellectual decline, which has appeared in all fields of human endeavor except those that deal with purely material things. The intellect has been browbeaten so long in theory that one cannot be surprised if it is now ceasing to function in practice.

The intellectual decadence of the day... appears in secular education as well. Sometimes it is assisted by absurd pedagogic theories, which, whatever their variety in detail, are alike in their depreciation of the labor of learning facts. Facts, in the sphere of education, are having a hard time. The old-fashioned notion of reading a book or hearing a lecture and simply storing up in the mind what the book or the lecture contains—this is regarded as entirely out of date. A year or so ago I heard a noted educator give some advice to a company of college professors—advice which was typical of the present tendency in education. It is a great mistake, he said in effect, to suppose that a college professor ought to teach; on the contrary he ought simply to give the students an opportunity to learn.

This pedagogic theory of following the line of least resistance in education and avoiding all drudgery and all hard work has been having its natural result; it has joined forces with the natural indolence of youth to produce in present-day education a very lamentable decline.

The decline has not, indeed, been universal; in the sphere of the physical sciences, for example, the acquisition of facts is not regarded as altogether out of date. Indeed, the anti-intellectualistic tendency in religion and in those subjects that deal specifically with the things of the spirit has been due, partly at least, to a monopolistic possession of the intellect on the part of the physical sciences and of their utilitarian applications. But in the long run it is to be questioned whether even those branches of endeavor will profit by their monopolistic claims; in the long run the intellect will hardly profit by being excluded from the higher interests of the human spirit, and its decadence may then appear even in the material sphere.

But however that may be, whether or not intellectual decadence has already extended or will soon extend to the physical sciences, its prevalence in other spheres—in literature and history, for example, and still more clearly in the study of language—is perfectly plain. An outstanding feature of contemporary education in these spheres is the growth of ignorance; pedagogic theory and the growth of ignorance have gone hand in hand.

The undergraduate student of the present day is being told that he need not take notes on what he hears in class, that the exercise of the memory is a rather childish and mechanical thing, and that what he is really in college to do is to think for himself and to unify his world. He usually makes a poor business of unifying his world. And the reason is clear. He does not succeed in unifying his world for the simple reason that he has no world to unify. He has not acquired a knowledge of a sufficient number of facts in order even to learn the method of putting facts together. He is being told to practice the business of mental digestions; but the trouble is that he has no food to digest. The modern student, contrary to what is often said, is really being starved for want of facts.

Certainly we are not discouraging originality. On the contrary, we desire to encourage it in every possible way, and we believe that the encouragement of it will be of immense benefit to the spread of the Christian religion. The trouble with the university students of the present day, from

the point of view of evangelical Christianity, is not that they are too original, but that they are not half original enough. They go on in the same routine way, following their leaders like a flock of sheep, repeating the same stock phrases with little knowledge of what they mean, swallowing whole whatever professors choose to give them—and all the time imagining that they are bold, bad, independent young men, merely because they abuse what everybody else is abusing, namely, the religion that is founded upon Christ. It is popular today to abuse that unpopular thing that is known as supernatural Christianity, but original it certainly is not. A true originality might bring some resistance to the current of the age, some willingness to be unpopular, and some independent scrutiny, at least, if not acceptance, of the claims of Christ. If there is one thing more than another which we believers in historic Christianity ought to encourage in the youth of our day it is independence of mind.

It is a great mistake, then, to suppose that we who are called “conservatives” hold desperately to certain beliefs merely because they are old, and are opposed to the discovery of new facts. On the contrary, we welcome new discoveries with all our hearts, and we believe that our cause will come to its rights again only when youth throws off its present intellectual lethargy, refuses to go thoughtlessly with the anti-intellectual current of the age, and recovers some genuine independence of mind.

We look not for a mere continuation of spiritual conditions that now exist, but for an outburst of new power; we are seeking in particular to arouse youth from its present uncritical repetition of current phrases into some genuine examination of the basis of life; and we believe that Christianity flourishes not in the darkness, but in the light.

The right to originality has to be earned; it cannot be earned by ignorance or by indolence. A man cannot be original in his treatment of a subject unless he knows what the subject is; true originality is preceded by patient attention to the facts. It is that patient attention to the facts which, in application of modern pedagogic theory, is being neglected by the youth of the present day.

In our insistence upon mastery of facts in education, we are sometimes charged with the desire of forcing our opinions ready-made upon our students. We professors get up behind our professorial desks, it is said, and proceed to lecture. The helpless students are expected to memorize what we have said, with all our firstly's and secondly's and thirdly's; and finally they are expected to give it all back to us in the examination, such a system—so the charge runs—stifles all originality and all life. Instead, the modern pedagogical expert comes with a message of hope, instead of memorizing facts, he says, true education consists in learning to think; drudgery is a thing of the past, and self-expression is to take its place.

In such a charge, there may be an element of truth; possibly there was a time in education when memory was over-estimated and thinking was deprived of its rights. But if the education of the past was one-sided in its emphasis upon acquaintance with the facts, surely the pendulum has now swung to an opposite extreme which is more disastrous still. It is a travesty upon our pedagogic method when we are represented as regarding a mere storing up of lectures in the mind of the student as an end in itself. In point of fact, we regard it as a means to an end, but a very necessary means; we regard it not as a substitute for independent thinking, but as a necessary prerequisite for it. The student who accepts what we say without criticism and without thinking of his own is no doubt very unsatisfactory; but equally unsatisfactory is the student who undertakes to criticize what he knows nothing whatever about. Thinking cannot be carried on without the materials of thought; and the materials of thought are facts, or else assertions that are presented as facts. A mass

of details stored up in the mind does not in itself make a thinker; but on the other hand thinking is absolutely impossible without that mass of details. And it is just this latter impossible operation of thinking without the materials of thought which is being advocated by modern pedagogy and is being put into practice only too well by modern students. In the presence of this tendency, we believe that facts and hard work ought again to be allowed to come to their rights: it is impossible to think with an empty mind.

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