

REITH LECTURES 1967: A Runaway World

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Lecture 5: Men and Learning

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I keep on coming back to the same paradox. We are afraid of confusion, but the avoidance of confusion generates fear. Ambiguity worries us because we like the world to be tidy—yes or no, white or black, good or bad. But if we do get things sorted out into these nice clear-cut oversimplified categories, we then find ourselves taking sides, and this leads to violence. There is nothing new about this. Everyone agrees that most public discussion oscillates wildly between total confusion and crude oversimplification. But the usual excuse is that this is just a symptom of ignorance. People often talk as if the solution were quite simple: we just need more and better education.

What does education do? Does it really help to clear the fog of prejudice? Will ‘better’ education really make it any easier to cope with the consequences of our ever expanding technology? Our ideas about education are themselves distorted by the process of classification, Education is ‘what we do at school’; it is a matter of acquiring knowledge, and knowledge is broken up into a variety of ‘subjects’: mathematics, geography, history, French and so on. This ‘what we do at school’ gets contrasted with ‘what we do at home’. So the word ‘education’ suggests school life, not home life. Then again schoolteachers are for ever telling their pupils to work hard at their lessons and not play about, otherwise they will be punished, but later, after we leave school, work comes to mean what we do in the factory or the office, while play is what we do in our free time, and this reinforces our earlier ideas. In effect we are taught to believe that education is an unpleasant process to which we are forced to submit when we are away from home. So although education is a ‘good thing’, it is a kind of necessary evil: it is part of the rat race whereby we get on in the world.

Of course, I realise that many people use the word ‘education’ in a much broader sense, but you must admit that in common speech it means the drudgery of schooling and not much else. Anyway, for the next few minutes I should like you to put this convention quite on one side. The education I want to talk about is the total process whereby newly-born speechless infants are reared and taught to play their roles as adult human beings. This kind of education begins at birth and ends at death; we learn much faster at the age of one than at the age of 61, though normal human beings can always go on learning. Education in this sense is not just the accumulation of facts: it is the acquisition of skills by which we can cope with the facts. To use my overworked computer analogy again: education is the process by which the human computer is programmed to handle the data. Data storage - that is to say, the memorising of facts - is entirely secondary.

Education is not something primarily associated with school or technical college or university; it takes place mainly in the home. Its really fundamental component is the habit of communication established in extreme infancy, within the first year of life

before the child begins to talk at all. Here, at the very beginning, when the mother first starts to convert her animal baby into a human being, the sole purpose of education is to link things together, to establish communication, to make the child conscious that it is part of the family group. The separation of identity comes much later; but when it comes, we British go to the opposite extreme and carry self-identification too far.

The fact that people in other countries do things quite differently need not mean that we are wrong, but the difference here is striking. In the less sophisticated corners of the world, the kind of isolated loneliness which we consider normal - the emphasis on the uniqueness of the individual self separated from all others - is never cultivated at all. The child is born into a community which consists of whole classes of fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, cousins and so on. In almost any situation there are half a dozen or so individuals who can act as stand-ins for any other. Moreover this is not just a temporary phase of early childhood: most people spend their whole lives surrounded and supported by kinsfolk, in such circumstances the normal mode of self-expression is to say: 'We do this,' not 'I do this.'

Let me pursue this point. It is a very striking fact that almost everywhere outside the centres of Western capitalism the normal emphasis of education is on group identity rather than individual identity. I believe that this is very relevant to our problem of fear. We have all of us, at one time or another experienced the sense of personal relaxation combined with excitement which comes from close identification with a group. Giving a cheer to 'our side', whether it means supporting our school or our football team or even just occasionally our government, is enjoyable and exhilarating. It can also be dangerous. There is not much difference between a football crowd and a mob. What goes on here is complicated, and I don't think that anyone really claims to understand very much about the psychology of crowds, but one thing is quite clear: participation in a group reduces, for the time being, the individual's private feelings of personal anxiety. In contrast, every decision which must be made, by myself without the support of my fellows, intensifies anxiety.

Now our society provides a great variety of institutions into which the individual may merge his identity: family, school, sports club, trade union, church, firm, political party—there are literally dozens of contexts in which the lonely individual can sink his 'I' into a collective 'we' and gain greater confidence by doing so. Yet paradoxically a great deal of our explicit educational effort, both at school and at home, is aimed in exactly the opposite direction. The overt values of English formal schooling are that the individual should be self-reliant and show initiative. From the age of ten upwards the whole system becomes viciously competitive. The aim is to discover and cultivate the powers of latent leadership in the few with total disregard for the emotional suffering that this imposes on the many. In Britain this objective is common both to the private school system, which is rigged so as to preserve the vested interests of the wealthy, and to the state school system, which pretends to offer 'equal opportunity for all'. In practice, the state system is devoted to the needs of a meritocracy in which all the rewards go to the most able.

In private sector and public sector alike, every attempt to introduce a touch of socialist justice—the principle 'from each according to his capacity, to each according to his need' —is resisted up to the hilt. We are told that we must segregate the clever just as

we must segregate the criminal; comprehensive schools, it is said, will 'lower educational standards' and ruin the nation! This isn't a straight issue of party politics—even among the Tories the really passionate opponents of comprehensive education stand well over to the right—but you have only to consider what happened in Enfield and then read some of the speeches made at the recent Conservative Party Conference to see how mixed up you can get. Many people take it for granted that the 'best' schools are those which cater for the children of the very rich. But if you can't afford to send your son to Eton, then the next best thing is cut-throat competition—to the death.

This is a sad business. Even if it were true, which it isn't, that success at school and university guaranteed success in adult life, the rat race is conducted at terrible cost. Over the past 50 years we in England have partly replaced the old system of class stratification based on hereditary wealth by a new class system based on achieved status. Simultaneously our educational system has developed into an entirely ruthless machine for the elimination of the unworthy. Suicide and mental breakdown are now so common in student populations that they are almost taken for granted.

We instil competitive values into our children from entirely dishonest motives. Few of us have any deep concern about whether our offspring become civilised human beings: we are only worried about social class. We are hag-ridden by the fear and envy endemic to a society which combines class stratification with the possibility of social mobility. Those who are high up in the existing order are driven to compete by fear and contempt for those below; those lower down are driven by envy of those above. Schooling is a means to an end: the child must better himself, or consolidate an established position. Only a tiny minority thinks of education as a means by which individuals are given human interests and values so that they can fit together into the total jig-saw of society: for most of us education is an instrument of war, a weapon by which the individual beats down his competitors and defends himself against adversity. I assure you, I do not exaggerate.

It seems probable that everyone, including those who are now most successful, would feel much more comfortable in a less competitive world, and if we are looking towards the future this should be one of our long-term objectives. It won't be easy to achieve but this much is quite plain. In order to arrive at a system in which less value is placed on the relative merit of individuals we shall need to make quite basic changes to the overall structure of formal school education. If we are to produce adults who are inspired by an ethic of co-operation rather than an ethic of fratricide, then we must start out by devising a school system in which passing competitive examinations and proving that Tom is much cleverer than Harry ceases to be part of the exercise.

Oh, I know this is very Utopian. A General Certificate of Education at A level is worth the money, and even more so a university degree. The child who finishes the hurdle race with a bit of paper which entitles him to write n after his name has financially much better prospects than his brother who gets stuck at the 11-plus. This is why parents and children alike hurl themselves into the fray with such ferocity: if you take away the carrot of financial reward, standards really will fall all along the line. But this is only because the children and the parents and the schoolmasters and the university dons are all so totally confused.

The confusion starts out with a clash of basic assumptions. The schoolmasters and the dons tend to believe that innate intelligence is a quality which varies very greatly from one individual to another, but that you can't do much about it except measure it. That being so, school education is not much concerned with 'developing the intelligence': it simply stuffs the wretched pupil full of facts, and measures the result by an examination. Parents, on the other hand, start out with the sentimental idea that the intellectual potential of all children is basically the same. In that case the only way to get your beloved child out in front is either to cheat by sending him to a privileged school or to chastise and bully him so that he passes examinations which the other fellow fails.

Both sides are right up to a point; and both sides are entirely wrong. Intelligence is a very complicated affair involving a mixture of all sorts of mental capacities and psychological attitudes. The underlying mental faculties are inborn, the product of the individual's genetic constitution. No amount of education or parental devotion will ever turn a dull boy into a genius. On the other hand, the way in which we use and develop our potential skills will be determined by things that happen to us after we are born. The trouble here is that many of the really critical events seem to occur very early on, perhaps even in the first few weeks of life or even in the course of the birth trauma itself, and I don't think that there is the slightest evidence that at this very early age a child is at an advantage if it happens to have a mother who is especially prosperous, or intelligent, or ambitious. Just how far the intellectual potential of a child can still be modified even after it reaches school age is a moot point; certainly the margin of flexibility is not very great. On the other hand, it is absolutely clear that by the time children do get to school they already have abilities of very different kinds. Also it is plain that any attempt to 'measure' intelligence by examination will simply measure certain sorts of ability and ignore the rest. But the open-ended non-measurable kind of ability may be just what we are looking for.

In some ways the role of education in the development of the individual is much like the role of habitat in the natural selection of species. You may remember that much earlier on I made a distinction between species which have a very specialised adaptation to a very narrowly defined kind of environment, and versatile species which can survive in all sorts of conditions: the difference, say, between a rare Alpine plant which can only exist at a particular altitude on the north face of a rock of a particular chemical composition, and a common garden weed. And I made the point that it is the versatile species, the weeds, which are not tied down to any particular orthodoxy, which have the best prospect of survival in a rapidly changing world. So it is with individuals. The people who are going to be able to cope with our rapidly changing future are those who are temperamentally unorthodox—the curious, the sceptical, the ones who don't care a fig for established opinion, people like Charles Darwin, who said of himself: 'I have steadily endeavoured to keep my mind free so as to give up any hypothesis, however much beloved, as soon as facts are shown to be opposed to it.'

If all this is true, the implications for education should be fairly obvious. We should be looking for people with divergent unorthodox kinds of intelligence, not conformist orthodox types. But since all methods of selection by competitive examination can only be based on established orthodoxies, we must try to get rid of competitive

examinations altogether. The aim must be to maximise variation. We need to give all children equal opportunity to learn how to learn, but after that they should be encouraged to follow their own special interests instead of the textbook conventions of examination syndicates. Fine words, but what a hope! The academic machine is supposed to be searching for genius but, with things set up as they are now, it can only recognise those who are both very clever and very obedient. It turns out excellent bureaucrats, but rejects or perhaps never notices those genuinely imaginative characters who refuse to toe the line.

Higher education is necessarily selective. It isn't everyone who can benefit from life in a university; but clearly those who do go to a university should include the innovators who are going to lead us forward into our bewildering future. To see what sort of people these are, we might consider who they have been in the past. Who are the people who really stand out over the past few centuries as having completely altered our western view of where man stands in relation to the universe? Newton, Darwin, Marx, Freud, Picasso—there are only a dozen or so world-shakers in this class. And if we ask, 'Are these the sort of people who are likely to flourish and gain approval in our present educational garden?' the answer in most cases must be an unqualified no. Newton, it is true, was a life-long academic of extreme distinction, but, even so, in 1689 the Fellows of my College declared him to be an entirely unsuitable person to be their Provost; the best that Cambridge could offer to Darwin was an ordinary degree; Marx, who lived in England for 34 years, was never noticed at all.

So to go right back to my original question: yes, more and better education could help us to cope with the problems of an expanding technology, but only if we take a more enlightened view about what we mean by 'better' education. Education ought to be concerned with training people to exercise their imaginations creatively.

It wouldn't matter so much if educational diplomas simply gave a list of the courses in which the owner has shown reasonable proficiency. What is outrageous is that an entirely anonymous examination machine should have the arrogance to grade its victims as 'adequate', 'good' and 'excellent' without any personal knowledge, and indeed without any evidence at all except a few written scripts compiled in a great hurry under highly artificial conditions. Let's face it: school and university examinations in their present form do not test ability or personality or knowledge: they simply test a capacity for passing examinations, an aptitude which is of rather marginal utility in ordinary adult life.

But the vested interest in examinations is very large, and certificates and class marks have enormous appeal to the bureaucratic mind, so it's difficult to get any anti-examination campaign off the ground. Competitive examinations give the appearance of objectivity and fairness. Those who operate more humane methods of selection are always suspected of favouritism and of rigging the market through private old-boy networks. But there is not much point in being fair to all if you still end up by picking out the wrong people.

In the context of my general theme there are two main points! I am getting at here. The first is the straightforward one that our competitive examination system of selection simply falls to pick out the kind of people who can cope most effectively

with problems of social and technological change; the second is that the emphasis which our system places on individual achievement is entirely misdirected.

Much of our adult state of fear is linked up with the feeling that I, an individual, have to cope single-handed with a hostile world, the details of which have become far too complicated for me to understand. This feeling of isolation is in part a by-product of the way we have been educated and the stress that is put on passing examinations. The more 'successful' your education, the more likely you are to feel alone, because the process of segregation has been more complete. Just a few of you are academics like myself. 11-plus, O-Level, A-Level, College Entrance, Degree Class, PhD: at every stage you proved how much cleverer you are than all those other fellows, until in the end you stand quite alone and afraid. It ought to be possible to manage things in a different way so that we go forward into the future together, collaborating as a team instead of looking around for every possible opportunity to knife each other in the back.

Don't blame the schoolmasters for the kind of education you received: they crammed you with facts instead of teaching you how to enjoy the pleasures of civilisation because the ethos of a competitive society compels them to behave in this way. If society insists that individuals be segregated out into categories—first class, second class, third class, upper, middle, lower—then the system will always have to waste an enormous amount of time and energy allocating individuals to the right slots and marking them up with the proper labels, but so far as education is concerned the whole operation is utterly irrelevant. Those of you who have, like me, been right through the mill know very well that this is so. It is up to us to get the system changed. Comprehensive schools are a ginning, but that is only the start.

But if examinations have nothing to do with education, what has? Education is concerned with the passing on of tradition, so we tend to think of the teacher as a wise old man, and a great deal of prestige still attaches to the teaching of history and ancient philosophy. This would be fair enough in a stable and conservative society. Among the Australian Aborigines, for example, many crucial pieces of information about the environment—such as the location of waterholes, weather lore, and the habits of animals and plants—are treated as an esoteric form of knowledge known only to a small circle of very old men whose secrets are passed on bit by bit to the younger members of the tribe in the course of a long series of initiations. But in societies like our own, which are undergoing rapid development; it is the young adults, not the old ones, who possess the kind of knowledge which young people need to share before they can participate fully in what is going on. With us, for example, it is, by and large, the men under 40 who 'know what is worth knowing'—the computer men, the micro-biologists, the ethologists, the radio astronomers: in such fields anyone with a white hair in his head is already hopelessly out of date. Yet we still have the antiquated notion that education is a function in which the old teach the young. This point is terribly important. The pace of technological change is such that the opinions of the elderly become increasingly irrelevant. In our runaway world no one much over the age of 45 is really fit to teach anybody anything; and that includes me. I am 57. It's hard to accept, but that's just the point.

One major change that is needed in our society is that we should all recognise how quickly we are changing. It is quite essential that those in authority be persuaded to

take a back seat much earlier on in their lives than they do at present. In the universities just now there is a good deal of talk about Student Power. The student body as a whole, or certain substantial chunks of it, is in an anarchist, rebellious mood. It claims that the machinery of university education has become heartless and bureaucratic, that those who run the universities are taking far too little trouble to discover what the students themselves really want. As with all such complaints, facts get distorted and injustices exaggerated, but the students certainly have a case. University committees and university departments are all too often managed by old men, wise in experience but quite out of touch with what is now going on

But this is not a peculiarity of universities. Professors are compulsorily retired at 67; much of British industry is directed (or misdirected) by elderly gentlemen well over 70. Medical science is steadily increasing the expectation of life, and this, combined with the concentration of industry into larger and larger units, is having the effect that an ever greater proportion of the final power of decision is being concentrated into the hands of very old men. Since those who hold offices of power will never willingly give them up, I believe that there is only one solution to this problem. The young must somehow or other enforce quite arbitrary rules of early retirement. In those parts of our system concerned with research and technological development, no one should be allowed to hold any kind of responsible administrative office once he has passed the age of 55.

In a changing world machines get obsolete very quickly; so do human beings. How can young people possibly have confidence in the advice and judgment of old men who freely admit that they are totally bewildered? Certainly the young need to be educated; they need to be taught to gain confidence in the astonishing powers of their own imaginations. But they don't need to be loaded down with the out-of-date clutter of useless information which is all that traditional scholarship has to offer. Only those who hold the past in complete contempt are ever likely to see visions of the new Jerusalem. The old are only competent to do the job that they were brought up to do—that is, to operate with the out-of-date oversimplified stereotypes that were current in their youth. Such people, and they include myself, are not qualified to plan a new world for the rising generation, nor are they fit to train the young to cope with situations of which they themselves have had no experience. They can of course map out some of the difficulties and point up some of the more glaring deficiencies of the system as it is, which is roughly what I have been trying to do in these lectures. But the creation of a tolerable future is not a task which our present rulers could ever hope to undertake. Most of them should accept Voltaire's advice and retire gracefully to cultivate their own gardens.