



I. Introduction to the Common Course (1952)

[This Introduction was typed and bound along with the "Talk on the Common Course", which follows. In the scheme of arrangement, however, the intention of the original editor seems to have been to separate them; they are thus presented separately here. The two paragraphs that follow were inserted by the original editor. -Ed.]

These remarks concerning the Common Core Course originated sometime in 1952, and as indicated, were meant to introduce the student to the over-all intent and conception of the course.

They provide the most extensive and complete description of what the Common Course was meant, in theory, to be. The manuscript was only partially edited (fragments of other corrected versions exist) and in all probability the material was simply dictated and circulated with only minor corrections.

Preliminary Remarks which the teacher may occasionally use as a leitmotif in order to lead the student back to the intentions of the course.

The task before you will not be accomplished here and cannot be taught; if you want to become free men and women, this task will remain yours for your whole life; we your teachers, will start you on this task, show it to you as more experienced collaborators, join and help you in it because we ourselves are still in it. The task is "to major" in life. No final degree will be bestowed upon us, though we may accumulate little degrees during our life which will consist of recognition and confirmation given freely by other human beings who are engaged in the same task. The final degree can be conferred upon us only at the moment of our death, tentatively by our survivors and perhaps finally by God. The task begins now that you enter the College because that is the moment when the human mind is supposed to have come into its own and to be on its own.

In addition to and above the various capacities of performance which the higher learning offered by this college will develop in you, this course inquires into the creative powers of man. Without them, your accumulated performing capacities can never be used and directed freely by yourself, but will only direct and use you. There is among these powers one which is perhaps central and which, at any rate, controls all the others, and that is the tower of free philosophical reasoning. It is practiced in a procedure of mutual dialectics during which fundamental positions that have been agreed upon are reasoned out. While our reasoning will help us to find the other creative powers of man, these in turn will make the central power of reason clear and understandable.

Philosophical procedures require a philosophical attitude. The philosophical attitude is not identical with the metaphysical approach which is theoretical, impassioned, impersonal, rational and logical. Philosophy does not raise any such claims. Theory recognizes only things that are, but does not know anything about things that can or shall be; it never reaches into the realm of freedom. Creative passion is one of the most valuable elements of reason; the irrational can be very reasonable, because ratio and rationalization are not reason: they only try to command reason. Logic serves reason as a guide, it is not its leader. Impersonality means objectivity and involves the distinction between the objective and the subjective; these are scientific terms which become pseudoscientific or super-scientific if they are used by metaphysics; they are not philosophical, reasonable concepts. It is one of the chief characteristics of philosophy to be personal, because philosophy deals with a being that is a person and establishes the distinction between the objective and the subjective; it therefore transcends both.

The philosophical attitude excludes no other creative attitude; on the contrary, it specifically deals with the scientific, artistic, politic, erotic, ethic and religious attitudes and relates them all to philosophy. However, the philosophical attitude excludes all non-creative attitudes: the metaphysical approach and with it the fanatical and critical attitudes, which are closely related to it. The believer believes that he possesses and knows the absolute truth, truth as an absolute. To him our inquiry into truth must appear as an unnecessary or even dangerous enterprise. This makes him a bad participant of philosophy, unless he is ready to forget his belief for the time being. The critic who poses as a non-believer is so occupied with the idea of knowing everything better that he can hardly be expected to try to know more about anything. He is himself a believer, and although he may not believe that he possesses the truth, he seems to think that he is the truth. The fanatic of the absolute and the absolute critic are joined together like Siamese twins; they play the game of master and servant according to the changing patterns of superiority or inferiority feelings. Opposed to both is the philosophical attitude as the attitude of freedom. In it we are at the same time faithful and skeptical, faithful to the task and skeptical about the results of our own enterprise.

Introduction

Progressive education has developed into an educational system without higher education. It has furthered higher learning by more modern and more efficient methods of developing intelligence only. It neglected to develop free will (will to freedom) and free reason and lost sight of higher aims, creative values and responsibilities. With a naive and ruthless optimism, it expected a self-development of values as a result of the mere increase in intelligence and the power that goes with it. Today the increase of higher learning without higher education has become a socially explosive force. Lack of direction, inability of self-direction and the ensuing readiness to be directed. by "others" -- whoever these others may be -- (Riesman, The Lonely Crowd) the emptiness of mind and heart in the new generation (see recent books on psychology), the lack of enthusiasm and even curiosity -- all these point to one phenomenon: loss of personality.

Politically this is dangerous because it is a preparation for totalitarianism, which can supplement higher learning with the lowest education by imposing its own aims on everybody and breaking everybody's will by force. The "lonely crowd" composed of lonely individuals who are tired of their own aimlessness may easily fall for and even welcome this. The lost individual's desperate call for help (Paul Tillich, The Courage To Be) will prove of as little avail as the snobbish attempt at regaining classical higher education through the reprinting of a "hundred great books" and the fabrication of a Syntopicon by people who are as

"busy" with culture as others are with business. The metaphysics of classical higher education, like the metaphysics of organized religion, have ceased to be matters of common belief; this situation cannot be changed through inter-denominational conferences or syntopical of a couple of hundred "great ideas."

In this situation the higher learning developed by progressive education must be related to a new type of higher education capable of using the possibilities opened up by progressive learning for the handling of processes in such a way that they work for the progress of creative freedom and not for the maelstrom of destruction. This can only be done by the will of free personalities who direct themselves through reasoning and communication towards the free creation of values which they agreed upon.

This is mainly the responsibility of the colleges. The individuals who eventually compose the lonely crowd pass through them. The power of intelligence they acquire in the colleges makes them restless; the lack of a self-directed mind and self-trusting heart -- the result of a lack of higher education -- makes them bored and desperate. And yet, the colleges have a historically unique opportunity. Higher education, formerly only possible for a few, is now open to almost everybody. The greatest pride of a college should be its ability to say that even those students who failed in the fields of higher learning have received here higher education; they are now better citizens, better lovers, better friends: they know how to enjoy art, how to respect science, and how to feel responsible for freedom.

Higher education in the past has always rested on a fundament of metaphysics. As such, it formed man himself -- man the maker, although not yet man the free maker. It formed certain types of persons who were like the embodiment of the metaphysical aims and beliefs of the age. Our modern higher education has the task of creating free makers, free personalities out of mass-individuals. And this it must accomplish without the old privilege of former education, which started by enforcing a strict metaphysical system of values upon the student. It has no longer authority and therefore must create the only authority that exists for free men, the authority of responsible authorship, which consists of the joys and responsibilities connected with the free creation of values. For this purpose teaching and instruction are not enough. The modern educator must form the habit of philosophizing freely in his student because this is the fundamental creative activity of man. He must think together with his students and work out with them the problems of vital concern to the modern personality. He must place himself together with his students right into the midst of the situation which the modern world has created for man.

This can be done by an analysis of the situation and by reasoning out certain possible positions from which a change in this situation may come about. Through this procedure the student should be enabled to evaluate freedom and make certain decisions in its direction. The procedure itself consists of questions, answers, counter-questions, categorizations, statements of problems, statements of various possibilities for evaluation and decision. The more use can be made of the personal questions of the student himself, the better for the course. Questions and answers must be directed and reinterpreted during the course so that the problems assume more and more relevance. An analysis of the students' own situation in their world should eventually result in an analysis of the situation of man in the world. The students' own evaluation should be tested by an analysis of their relationships, their aims in life, their inclinations, eventually leading up to an evaluation of the creative possibilities of man.

The best method of character education has always been through examples. This is why we shall outline the great arch-figures of man, each of whom has established one of the fundamental value-creating capabilities of men, because each was a free creative personality. They all create through inter-communication in order to make the free personality the core of the community; this is the conception of the common core course.

(This Introduction is to be used in the lecture session and for the following discussion; it will also serve as an introduction to the principles of communicative education. See Session 3, part 1.)

[Here the manuscript makes the transition to the "Talk on the Common Course". -Ed.]