



# To "Be" or to "Do"

## *A Note on American Education*

by **JAMES TRUSLOW ADAMS**

A RECENT WRITER in a privately printed volume on education begins with the sentence: "What is the matter with our schools? — Everything." I would not go quite as far as that in a blanket indictment of our educational system, but I must confess that to an outside but interested observer the system appears to be more and more hopelessly uncertain of where it is trying to go or what it is trying to do — a welter of "isms" in a sea of expense, without the slightest agreement as to basic aims.

I am, as I said, an outsider. I have never been a teacher and I sometimes question whether I have ever really been taught, though I went to three preparatory schools in all, a small college, and did post-graduate work at one of the largest Eastern universities. My comments on the system derive from my own experiences as a student, from reading a moderate amount of educational "literature," and from the effects of education as made visible in the men and society about me.

In looking back, it is of course very easy to underrate the real influence of one's teachers.

In the past couple of days I have happened to note both Gibbon's characterization of his Oxford days as the most unprofitable of his whole career, and Henry Adams's of his four years at Harvard as wasted. I have often, however, tried to estimate just what my education did for my own incomparably less powerful mind. I must have had in all, I think, about twelve or thirteen years, and as I look back on them I am impressed with the appalling waste of time and effort. I was taught Latin, German, and French, with the result that I never could read either of the first two without a dictionary. In conversation I never could speak more than a sentence of any of the three, and I have never known an American student who could — that is, merely as a result of his studying a language in school and college. Yet, at thirty-five, I taught myself in a few months more Persian than I had ever learned of Latin in several years' drudgery in boyhood. I remember, during the war, meeting on the street in Paris a young French lad of about twelve, of the better class, who stopped me and asked where he could get for his collection one of the insignia which I was wearing as an American

officer. He spoke English fluently and on my asking where he had learned it, he replied, somewhat surprised, "Why, at school." In America, with all the colossal expenditure on buildings, that is a feat which, so far as I know, no American school has ever accomplished for one of its pupils.

Of history as I may have been taught it, I can remember nothing. So far as I can now discern, all my historical knowledge, moderate as it is, has been acquired by reading, long years subsequent to the ending of my formal "education." The rudiments of spelling and mathematics have undoubtedly been useful. As far as my "education" was concerned, the arts of painting, sculpture, architecture, and music were simply nonexistent. I never heard a word about the world of delight to be found in them or of their possible influence on the life of the spirit. Of my struggles with grammar there remains nothing. I came of a cultured family and learned at home to use my mother tongue with a moderate degree of correctness. On the other hand, from my experience with country people in a village where I was on the Board of Education, I could not see that if they did not speak correctly by home training, they ever learned to do so in school. Of my physics and chemistry I have only hazy recollections. My interest in the former, which has developed in the past few years, approaching it from the philosophical side, has led me to study it, and I am not sorry that my mind is so complete a blank concerning the physics of thirty years ago.

I have always been greatly interested in philosophy, and I well recall with what anticipations I went from my small college to Yale to get what I thought would be a genuine initiation into the subject under the late Professor Ladd. Never were a student's hopes doomed to more swift and complete annihilation. As I recall it, in his course he lectured to over three hundred students. During the lectures some of his audience read novels, some newspapers, while a few "grinds" like myself ruined their handwriting trying to keep up

with the lecturer in their note-taking. After another hour's work in my study rewriting the notes, I had a lecture written in longhand that was far inferior in exactness and proper expression to any chapter in a textbook that Ladd might have written, and after two hours' waste of time I had merely reached the point of having an imperfect text to study.

With the exception of one Japanese, none of the students whom I happened to know took the slightest interest in the subject. I had hoped that there might be opportunity, so essential in philosophy above all other studies, for some direct play of mind between my own un-instructed one and that of the instructor. There never was. The professor was a mere unapproachable oral textbook. Nevertheless, he had the illusion that studying "under him" had induced some play of mind among his novel-readers, and for that reason he used to give out the examination questions at the year's end so that the student might give original thought to them. Five of my friends were among the novel-readers. Having paid no attention to the course the entire year, they got me to sit under the apple trees at Ik Marvel's place, and for a couple of afternoons before the

examination I talked over the probable questions with them. They all passed, with higher marks, I believe, than I did myself, and received Yale's *imprimatur* that they were proficient in philosophy.

A year of that sort of thing proved enough. Since I had no wish to teach, I took my Master's degree and let a Ph.D. go hang. I have never regretted the step, though I have no illusions as to the self-educated man's being as well trained as one who has had a genuine education. Thus ended mine, which had cost me a dozen years and my father about six thousand dollars, pre-war. If it be objected that things are different to-day, I may add that I see no evidence of it; instead, I see an even greater confusion of aim and method. Not long ago I asked a well-known professor at one of the largest and best-known universities in the East what, in his candid opinion, his university did



Woodcuts by Donald Streeter

for the thousands of students who annually attended it. After a moment's thought he said that as far as he could see, the university turned out a standardized, low-grade mental product, much like an intellectual Ford factory.

## II

IT IS MY experience that the professors themselves are getting thoroughly tired of the overorganization and intellectual aimlessness of our modern educational institutions. To a great extent they themselves are caught in the mill. I think that America is the only civilized country in the world where what a man *does* counts for so much more than what he *is*, and where the general public, having no cultural standard by which to judge what a man is, takes as the basis of appraisal solely the visible signs of what presumably he has "done." A college degree has come to have a perfectly absurd value in the eyes of the public, not only in regard to the graduates of an institution, but in connection with the teaching staff. It is practically impossible for a man who has not obtained his Ph.D. label to progress far in teaching as a profession.

A year or two ago I was talking with a very successful teacher of English literature in a prominent school for girls. She had only an A.B. but was soon, after many years work, to have her sabbatical year. With sound instinct she wished to spend that year in England, becoming more familiar with the background of her subject, browsing as she wished among the masterpieces of the literature, and, at the end, bringing back to her pupils a wider knowledge, a deeper insight, and a new enthusiasm. But, no. She had reached the limit of salary to which she could ever attain with only an A.B., and therefore she felt it necessary to spend the year in the soul-killing routine of taking "English courses" at an American university to obtain an A.M. According to the American educational system, there was never a question of what she *was*, of what she could give to her pupils, but of what tangible label she could wear, indicating to parents what she had

"done." The pages of school and college catalogues listing the faculty must be scattered over with degrees or the institution is suspect.

To a certain extent this might seem to be placing the responsibility on the public, but, as is so often true in speaking of American education, we find ourselves arguing in a vicious circle. As Dean Martin has well said, "The school cannot evade the responsibility for the present low level of mental life in this republic." Considering the enormous outlay for public education and the colossal sums represented by the endowments of our private institutions, we have a right to ask why, when educators have had resources undreamed of in any other land, they have created merely a muddled system

and a general level of cultural attainment among our people below that of any one of ten or a dozen European countries.

In so far as there appears to be any definite trend in American educational aims, it would seem to be toward President Eliot's ideal of "power and service" — one of the most baneful phrases, I fear, ever let loose by an educator upon an uneducated people. The stress is laid wholly upon the "doing." We have college courses in cost accounting, in real estate selling, in "business Eng-

lish," household decoration, basket ball coaching as a profession, poultry raising, personnel management — all ranking equally with philosophy or literature or science. I cannot see that, as a general rule, American universities or colleges leave the slightest cultural impress upon those who attend them. Once out in the world, the ideals and the interests of most of the university men are identical with those of any "go-getter" who, since leaving high school, has been learning his trade of stockbroking or real estate selling or manufacturing in the world of experience.

A man who has attended the Harvard Business School may indeed get ahead a bit faster than his less-tutored competitor, but that is because of his specific technical training, similar to that of a cabinetmaker or lawyer. Some corporations, after exhaustive research, have come to the conclusion that a "college man" is likely



to prove more valuable in the competition of business than one who is not; but that may be explained on many grounds quite divorced from education. College men come from a class that is at least moderately well up in the economic scale, with all that this implies in producing a superior animal — good air, food, and the rest. Moreover, a college man has four years more of such things than has the non-college class. Then there is the social knowledge and “mixing” experience gained in college. But neither of these advantages is in any way related to the main business of a university in its undergraduate department, which is, to provide a cultural background and an education that shall leave a man somewhat different from what it finds him. The mere fact that he is a better money-maker has nothing to do with that.

“For power and service.” This phrase not only expresses a utilitarian view of education, but, in the true American spirit of haste, it has tended to emphasize the desire not only for “results” — that is, “practical” results — but immediate ones. It has emphasized our belief that “culture” is either something to help one in his economic career or else is a mere fangle ornament for those who wish to “put on side” — not something vital in one’s own spiritual growth. American education cannot be considered as disconnected with all the shortcuts advertised in almost every American journal — the fifteen-minute-a-day French courses that will enable you to entertain the representative of a foreign firm and in a week will astonish your employer into raising your salary fifty per cent; or the scrapbook of the world’s wisdom that will enable you to impress your hostess and to become popular in cultured society by a few moments a day; or the five-foot shelf that will make you the intellectual equal of the lifelong student. The American has no use for the old Greek saying that “good things are hard.” He wants knowledge and wisdom without striving. His education has taught him no other path or ideal. If knowledge and culture are only for “power and service,” why not buy them “canned,” if it is possible, much as he stops at the service station to fill up with gas?

As compared with the “plants” of all our educational institutions in America, those of Europe make but a shabby showing for the most part — but they appear to get results

that ours do not. There, idle students are everywhere, but one cannot help comparing the mental outlook of the graduate of the high schools or “gymnasiums” or the universities abroad with those here at home and finding there a something which our students do not have — a maturity and a character.

The matter may be subjected to certain rough ways of measuring results as well. Leaving out such intellectual world centers as Paris, I may mention such a smaller town as Antwerp, generally considered a mere minor trading and industrial center. In wandering about the streets of this northern Venice, one not only finds bookshops everywhere, but displayed in them the latest books, in four languages, on science, philosophy, and the arts. This fact speaks eloquently of the results attained by Dutch education of whatever sort it may be. There are plenty of cities in the United States of the same population — under seven hundred thousand — in which it would be difficult to get in even one language a tenth of the books offered at Amsterdam in four. Again, in the twenty-eight years that the Nobel Prize in literature has been offered, it has never yet been won by an American, though winners have come from practically every country in Europe and even from the Orient. Still another educational foot rule: if we leave genius out of account and consider only the cultured public, we find that the number of books published in various countries in proportion to units of ten thousand inhabitants gives the following table:

Denmark .....	11.4
Latvia.....	9.5
Holland.....	9.0
Germany.....	5.2
Norway.....	4.7
France.....	3.8
Great Britain.....	3.0
United States.....	.85

Even such “backward” nations, according to our ideas, as Spain, Russia, and Poland produce more well-educated men than do we — the most abundantly supplied with money for education of all the nations in the world!

III

OUR ERRORS are fairly evident. For one thing, our democracy has ruined our education in two directions. On the one hand we have to a great extent turned over our public educa-

tional system to the mob. The weakest point in American life is perhaps its lack of public responsibility. Our city, and not seldom our state, politics are a hissing and a byword, a sink of corruption and ignorance; yet it is usually to them that we leave the selection of the membership in our Boards of Education. The cry is also raised that public money should be spent only in giving the public what it wants — and, in its uneducated and uncultured soul, what it wants is anything but a “liberal education.” It wants two things: one is the ability to earn a better living; the other is the label of having been educated — a diploma or degree certifying that the recipient is as good as any of the genuinely educated classes. As Lessing wrote a century and a half ago:

The iron pot longs to be lifted up  
By tongs of silver from the kitchen  
fire  
That it may think itself a silver  
urn.

This situation would be bad enough were it limited to the public school and state university systems; but, alas, as a competent critic has recently pointed out, too many of the private colleges and universities have “gathered up their academic gowns” and run after the mob “offering academic standing to anything for which there is a popular demand.”

Democracy, universal education, and high wages in the laboring class have had another unfortunate influence upon education by swamping our institutions with students who, although some are admirable, have in all too many instances no background at all, no desire to be really educated, and no power of becoming so. For this reason there has been a general movement during the past five years to simplify the wording of textbooks in all the higher grades of school, and even in our universities a professor has to choose his words with great care. I am told that even at Harvard a professor dare not speak of a king as having been “crowned,” for fear that the students will think he has been knocked on the head! Thus a student coming from a home with cultural background, with an intelligent mind, and a desire

to learn, has to be held back to a pace no faster than can be kept by the son of an ironpuddler or a carpenter. This is no negligible point. As the Greeks said, “One comes to limp who walks with the lame.”

There are obviously two educations. One should teach us how to make a living, and the other how to live. Surely these should never be confused in the mind of any man who has the slightest inkling of what culture is. For most of us it is essential that we should make a living. In the old days we learned how to do it mainly in the shop or on the farm or by practice in the office of merchant, lawyer, or doctor. In the complications of modern life and with our increased accumulation of knowledge, it doubtless helps greatly to compress some years of experience into far fewer years by studying for a particular trade or profession in an institution; but that fact should not blind us to another — namely, that in so doing we are learning a trade or a profession, but are not getting a liberal education as human beings. It is merely learning how to make a living. Culture is essential in order to enable us to know how to live and how to get the best out of living, and a liberal education should help



us on our way to acquire it, albeit the acquisition is a lifelong process. “Culture” is a much misused word and has come to have a very feminine and anæmic connotation in America. There have been innumerable definitions, but we may quote one of Matthew Arnold’s as being as suggestive as any for our purpose. He speaks of culture as “a harmonious expansion of all the powers which make the beauty and worth of human nature.” This is far removed from giving the degree of Bachelor of Arts to a student who has learned how to truss and dress poultry or has compassed the mysteries of how to sell real estate and run an apartment house.

Of course, life is short and getting rich is long — or may be. Most people who go to college to-day, aside from their lack of *desire* for education, have no *time* for it, because it does not lead immediately to “power and service.” This, to be sure, is nothing new. What *is* new is

that the colleges have opened their arms to all such and have deceived them into believing that when they have gotten an olla-podrida of ill-digested information of a scientific and cultural sort, with the practical courses to teach them how to earn a better living more quickly, they have acquired a liberal education and are entitled to consider themselves Bachelors or Masters of Arts. The words, indeed, have come to signify as little as "gentleman" or "lady."

It all comes back, like most things, to the question of values — of what is worth while, of what is the good life. Should we learn French in order to impress the boss? Should we pick up scraps from collections of the classics in order to make a hit at Mrs. Jones's party and impress her guests? One of the most sympathetic of foreign critics and observers of American life, a man who has spent much time among us, recently said that one feeling he always had here was that all our goods were in our shop windows and there was nothing behind. I believe this criticism is all too true. We are so busy *doing* that we have no time to *be*. We have almost forgotten what it is to *be*. We all have motor cars but no place to go. At present what we need above all else in America is education — not the infinitely variegated supply of courses that make a college catalogue look like Sears-Roebuck's, but a liberal education that will enable us to create a scale of values for our experiences and to take a philosophical attitude toward the complex reality about us.

If it be complained that most people have no time for an education that does not give immediate results, I again reply that that is their misfortune and has nothing to do with the matter. It is extremely unfortunate, if they are really capable of being educated, that they have no time for it; but, that being so, why tell them they *are* educated? Why not face the problem frankly and divide education (and degrees) into the two sections that I have suggested, the one to teach people how to make a living and the other to give them a *liberal* education, to teach them how to live, how to develop all those powers within themselves that make for the beauty and worth of life? If everyone in a democracy cannot have such an education (and a degree), neither can everyone have some of the other good things — a million dollars, or the talent that makes him a poet or painter or president of an advertising company.

#### IV

IS IT NOT time that we stopped marking down all our spiritual goods to the price that the lowest in the cultural scale can pay? In the seventeenth century the lower middle class in Holland became very prosperous and there was a great demand for small paintings to adorn their new houses. As one of the historians of their art writes, instead of improving the quality of the art, this situation brought about a deterioration, because of the simple rule that "a large uneducated demand in any field can never produce anything but a glut of inferior commodity."

Whether a democracy can last is problematic, but it is certain it cannot last if there are no leaders above the general level. How are we to train them? Is it by training men solely for a particular calling — medicine, engineering, running a locomotive, or laundering collars? Or are we to give, to some at least, an education in which doing is subordinated to being, in which the development of intelligence and character shall be held superior to passing an examination in philosophy after reading novels for nine months, or learning how to truss and dress poultry? Sir Arthur Keith recently said, speaking of English education, that "it is self-discipline; the formation of character in making man's higher centers masters of his cerebral establishments." However it may be brought about — and that is something for the educators to decide (though they seem woefully at sea about it) — what the leaders of our civilization need in education is to be taught to *be* something, rather than merely how to *do* something.

In America, even more than in Europe, the soul of the people depends upon the culture to be obtained by a genuinely liberal education. In Europe, in a sense, culture lies about one, for, in another definition of Arnold's, it is "contact with the best that has been thought and said." I happen to be writing this article before my fire in London. Any errand that takes me into the streets — a visit to my agent in Fleet Street, a trip down into the City, a stroll through Whitehall — stirs more historical questions than a month in college could answer. Three minutes in one direction will take me to the marvelous collection of the Dutch masters gathered here for the time being from all the world. Ten minutes in a bus and I have the

wonders of the Elgin marbles and the choicest sculpture of Phidias for the asking. I am planning an ordinary week-end trip which in a few hours will take me to France or Holland, where entirely new sets of impressions and questions of every sort — æsthetic, historic, racial — will be aroused in spite of myself.

It is far easier here, as I well know from years spent on both sides of the world, to stress *being* instead of *doing* than it is in any corner of my native land. In America not only is it almost impossible to get into contact with “the best that has been said and thought,” save through books alone, but *doing* has been exalted into a national cult and *being* is despised by public opinion as something enervating and almost disgraceful for a man to consider, something tainted with the idea of “idleness-and-leisure,” always hyphenated in America.

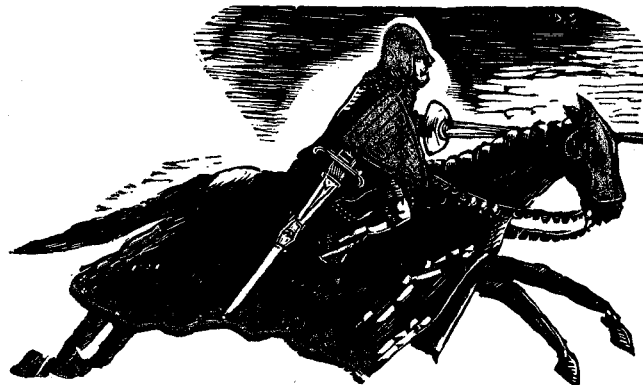
“Power and service.” But of what earthly use is power unless it is to produce or secure something worth while, and of what use is service unless it is to serve some desirable end? In so far as any ideal is considered an end in America, it is the ideal of a better life for everyone of every class; but that merely puts off the question one stage further. What is a good life? Are not power and service merely *means*, just as are dynamos or locomotives? And what can the end be except a state of *being* desirable to man? And should it not be the aim of education to help us learn what that end, that desirable state of being, is, and how to attain to it as far as the imperfect nature of man will allow?

We have been “doing” for three hundred years. We have cleared and settled a continent. We have accumulated the most colossal store of material power and resources the world has ever seen. Is it not time that we began to think what

to do with all our means, what the end is that we wish to attain? Are we forever to continue getting more things in order to get more things with which to get more things, and so on *ad infinitum*? Are we forever to seek the means without ever considering the end for which we seek them? Is there any sense in doing if we are never to become something, to be something, as a result? The entire practical life in America urges us to do unceasingly and unthinkingly. Should it not be one of the chief functions of education to find the strands of meaning in our ceaseless web of doing and to teach us some purpose in our lives? Can anything give us that purpose better than culture, in the sense first defined above? Can that culture be attained by a “liberal education” that permits “business organization,” “fire insurance,” “business psychology,” or “personnel administration” to be substituted at the whim of the student for literature, art, or philosophy?

Does not our whole educational muddle spring in part from mob snobbery — from exactly the same mental attitude that makes the laboring class talk of “colored wash-ladies” and “garbage gentlemen,” that makes them want to be dubbed Bachelors of Art after studying business English and typewriting, ever gaining heaven by serving earth? Does it not also spring in part from the lack of character and of a coherent philosophy of life among those who should be our educational leaders? To the latter, in taxes and endowments, we are giving money reckoned in hundreds of millions. We are giving them also a hundred million years or so of the lives of our young in every generation. In exchange, what are they returning to us in national ideals and culture? It is a fair question, which I call upon them to answer.

Next month, “**HOOVER AND LAW OBSERVANCE,**” by James Truslow Adams



# Should We OBEY the Prohibition Laws?

## *A Socratic Dialogue*

### PERSONS of the DIALOGUE

- H. BRUCE BROUGHAM — Editor of "The Index Number Institute"; ardent Dry  
ROBERT E. CORRADINI — Research Secretary of the World League Against Alcohol  
FRANK C. DAVISON — Canadian novelist  
HAVEN EMERSON, M.D. — Physician and former Commissioner of the Department of Health,  
New York City  
IRVING FISHER — Professor of Political Economy at Yale; chief defender of Prohibition  
FABIAN FRANKLIN — Editor, writer, and formerly Professor of Mathematics at Johns Hopkins;  
author of *What Prohibition Has Done to America* and *The ABC of Prohibition*  
JOHN C. GEBHART — Research Director of the Association Against the Prohibition Amendment  
FRANKLIN B. KIRKBRIDE — Banker  
HENRY GODDARD LEACH — Editor of THE FORUM  
GEORGE W. MARTIN — Lawyer; champion of personal liberty

PLACE — The home of Henry Goddard Leach

TIME — After dinner

MR. FISHER. We now have a President who is dry, who is resourceful, who was elected largely, I believe and he believes, by a dry vote, who is committed to better enforcement. I think the chances of success now are very bright if he receives the support of those who have not been in sympathy with the law but are good enough sports and good enough Americans to play the game and take their defeat in good spirit.

MR. FRANKLIN. I believe that any law which is felt to be contrary to the first principles of our government is not entitled to obedience, and when a good American sees such a law being incorporated in our Constitution, it is his duty to rebel against it.

MR. FISHER. Even after it has become a part of the Constitution by due process?

MR. FRANKLIN. The more so for that very reason. That makes it worse.

MR. FISHER. Why worse?

MR. FRANKLIN. Because then it is practically unrepeatable. No law which imposes

upon millions of people a code of conduct which they have never before accepted should be so framed that it cannot be repealed by any ordinary process. The first fundamental ground for obedience to a law is that the law may be repealed if a reasonably strong sentiment for its abolition exists.

MR. FISHER. That would condemn everything in the Constitution.

MR. FRANKLIN. I didn't say everything; I spoke of imposing upon millions of people an unwelcome code of conduct. Leave out the amendments which came as a result of the Civil War, and is there any part of the Constitution that any considerable body of Americans has ever resented?

MR. FISHER. You have asked me to omit the one that I naturally . . .

MR. FRANKLIN. The Civil War amendments were objected to by the South, and their nullification has been assented to by every Congress. In other words, the only provisions in the Constitution which have been seriously