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**A MODEST PROPOSAL FOR
SOME STRESS ON SCHOLARSHIP IN
GRADUATE TRAINING**

Address before the Graduate
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[p.1]

A MODEST PROPOSAL FOR SOME STRESS ON SCHOLARSHIP IN GRADUATE TRAINING

Jacob Viner

The title I have chosen for my talk may possibly recall to some of you the somewhat similar form of title which eighteenth-century writers used ironically for brutally satiric essays. Jonathan Swift in his "A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from being a Burden to their Parents or the Country" recommended that the problem of the starving children be solved by serving the children as food to the rich. Philip Skelton made his irony obvious by the very title of his essay, which read "Some Proposals for the Revival of Christianity". If, however, there is any irony in the title or satire in the contents of my talk, I would like you to believe that, like M. Jourdain's prose, they are unplanned and unconscious.

My proposal is both sincere and modest. I give also only an old-fashioned and modest meaning to the term "scholarship". I mean by it nothing more than the pursuit of broad and exact knowledge of the history of the working of the human mind as revealed in written records. I exclude from it, as belonging to a higher order of human endeavor, the creative arts, and scientific discovery.

What I propose, stated briefly and simply, is that our graduate schools shall assume more responsibility than they ordinarily do, so that the philosophers, economists, mathematicians, physicists and theologians they turn out as finished teachers, technicians, and practitioners shall have been put under some pressure or seduction to be also scholars.

I do not ask that before economists are turned out from the graduate school assembly line bearing the Ph.D. as a stamp of completion of the training process, they may be required to have shown that they are finished scholars as well as finished economists. True scholarship is always an unfinished and an unfinishable process. Scholarship is a commitment to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, but it can never provide guarantees that these have been attained. A great part of true learning, in fact, takes [p.2] the form of negative knowledge, of increasing awareness of the range and depth of our unconquered ignorance, and it is one of the major virtues of scholarship that only by means of it, one's own or someone else's, can one know when it is safe to dispense with it. Learned ignorance, therefore, is often praiseworthy, although ignorant learning, about which I will say something later, never is.

There is so much that needs to be known, and so little time in one's student days for learning it, that it is not a depreciation of the doctor's degree to regard it as merely marking the termination of one advanced stage in one's education, the last stage in which the responsibility is shared with others, to be followed by another stage lasting to the end of one's life in which one is intellectually wholly on one's own. The University of Avignon, in

1650, found itself faced by a candidate for the doctorate who had the capacity but who had applied himself less closely to the pursuit of knowledge than to less exacting and more exciting extracurricular activities. After some hesitation it conferred the doctoral degree upon him with the notation *sub spe futuri studii*, which I am told can be translated as "in the hope of future study." May I suggest that our doctoral degrees should be granted, and accepted, in this spirit even when there is not occasion to spell it out in the letter of the parchment?

I do not claim much for the pursuit of scholarship for its own sake, either in material rewards or in tangible benefit to the community. We live in perilous times, with crucial problems of life and death, of riches and poverty, of freedom and tyranny, awaiting solution. In the social sciences, as in the natural sciences, students tend to seek first for solutions to these problems, or for skills by aid of which they may be attacked. This is as it should be. These are first, and probably also second, and third and fourth. It is not as an escape from the burning problems of the world that I speak a word for scholarship. Not for me, and not recommended to any of you, is the plea of Joseph Hall during the British civil and religious contentions in the late sixteenth century: [p.3]

'Mongst all these stirs of discontented strife,
O let me lead an academic life.
To know much and to think we nothing know;
Nothing to have, yet think we have enow.¹

Nor do I wish to suggest that scholarship loses merit of any kind, even as scholarship, as it gains in utility, in relevance to major current problems. Such doctrine was once standard among the learned, but it today smacks of priggishness, of absence of a sense of proportion. A great mathematician, Jacobi, for instance, in a letter to another great mathematician, Legendre, wrote in 1830 of a third great mathematician, Fourier, as follows:

It is true that M. Fourier had the opinion that the principal purpose of mathematics was public utility and the explanation of natural phenomena; but a philosopher such as he was should have known that the sole end of science was the honor of the human mind, and that by this criterion a question in the theory of numbers was as important as a question of the nature of the universe.²

Although I have a sneaking admiration for Jacobi's doctrine of scholarship for scholarship's sake *alone*, judgment and discretion master inclination, and I refrain -- not without effort -- from subscribing to it. I certainly do not venture to preach it. Given the strength, however, of the prevailing pressures against expenditure of time and thought on learning which cannot demonstrate its relevance to increasing the yield of cotton or winning the cold war, the doctrine is scarcely to be regarded as a dangerous one. It is at least not a doctrine dictated by or approved by Moscow.

The modest proposal I make is that graduate schools make a place in their programs, a modest place, but one not confined to the Humanities departments, for scholarship, and that

they require or at least plead with their students, especially those who are destined to be college teachers, to devote to that part of the graduate school program a fraction, a modest fraction, of their attention.

A small place once given to scholarship, moreover, I would not object if it were then confined to its allotted space, or at least nor permitted to spread without restraint into areas beyond its proper jurisdiction, where if it intrudes it steals time and other less valuable resources from what are generally acknowledged to be more important activities. A verger of a [p.4] church, reprovved for locking the doors of the church, replied that when they were left open it often resulted in people praying all over the place. I concede that we don't want students and faculty unrestrainedly pursuing scholarship all over our universities while they have so much more urgent business to attend to.

Scholarship may be misplaced, moreover, not only because it distracts attention from more vital matters, but also because the scholar tends to inject himself, his techniques, his values, and his lack of impatience for quick results into problem areas where his contributions are regarded as irrelevant or as not prompt enough to be serviceable. Scholarship out of place brings nothing but embarrassment to the scholar and irritation to his clients -- if any. A woman in a shop asked for a drinking bowl for her dog. When the clerk replied that he had no drinking bowls especially for dogs, the woman said that any drinking bowl would do. The clerk, having found one for her, then suggested that he have the word "dog" painted on it. "No thanks," said the woman, "It is not necessary. My husband doesn't drink water and my dog can't read." Learning should be kept in its place. A university is today many things, very, very many things. As one of these many things, not too low on the list, it should strive to continue to be, or again to become, a place of and for scholarship. But it cannot be expected, and it will not be permitted, to be a place for scholarship only or predominantly.

Aware of the fact that scholarship does not necessarily yield even to the scholar the limited rewards, spiritual or material, sought from it, I thought for a time of choosing my title: "Lo, the Poor Scholar!" In one of his sermons, Robert South, an eighteenth-century Anglican clergyman, expounds at length, and with traces of complacency, the woes that beset the scholar. He takes as his text, Ecclesiastes I. 13: "In much wisdom there is much grief; and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow." Among the many perils of learning he lays special emphasis on its hazards for health and posterity: "Knowledge," he remarks, "rewards its followers with the miseries of poverty, and clothes [p.5] them with rags. Reading of books consumes the body, and buying of them the estate."³

Accumulation of knowledge moreover leads by a fatal association to desire to communicate it, and this in turn leads to the desire to write books, and this in turn to additional woes and pains. Rousseau once said, as reported by David Hume, that "one half of a man's life is too little to write a book and the other half to correct it." Rousseau must have meant a scholarly book, for he himself wrote many books, and never corrected any of them, as far as I have been able to discover. The modern scholar spends much more time in correcting the books of non-scholars which, unfortunately, took much less than a half a lifetime to write, than in

writing his own books. For the writing of books there is little time left to scholars by their other inescapable tasks. It is still true that of the writing of books there is no end, but it is also true that most scholarly manuscripts have no ending. If the scholar does complete his *opus majus*, there is often too little conversion of even university presses to the virtues of deficit financing to make its publication possible. If, nevertheless, the scholar does manage to complete his manuscript and to find an unworldly publisher, he still reaps little reward of any sort, except to his vanity if the reviewers are kind. But the kindness of reviewers, or even the hope of it, let scholars be frank about it, is often a sufficient reward. Consider the confession of Pascal, who made it his practice not to conceal from others his own weaknesses, or theirs:

Vanity is so anchored in the heart of man, that a soldier, a soldier's servant, a cook, a porter, brags and seeks admirers; and even philosophers wish for them. And those who write against vanity wish to have the glory of having written well; and those who read what the latter have written wish to have the glory of having read it; and I, who write this attack on vanity, perhaps also have a yearning for this glory; and perhaps also those who will read this.⁴

Nor is yielding to vanity the only reproach which can be levelled against the motives of the scholar. Curiosity is an even more prevalent, and, of course, more serious vice of the true scholar than vanity. Bernard Mandeville, who read human nature the way [p.6] an editor reads proof-sheets or a professor a doctoral thesis, looking only for errors, faults, and deviations from the standard proprieties, added avarice to vanity and curiosity as the faults of the scholar. Book royalties must have been larger in those days! But Mandeville maintained that private vices are public benefits, and in his *Fable of the Bees* he found illustration for his doctrine in the operations of scholars:

there is no Part of Learning but some Body or other will look into it, and labour at it, from no better Principles, than some Men are Fox-hunters, and others take delight in Angling. Look upon the mighty Labours of Antiquaries, Botanists, and the Virtuoso's in Butterflies, Cockle-shells and other odd Productions of Nature; and mind the magnificent Terms they all make use of in their respective Provinces, and the pompous Names they often give, to what others, who have no Taste that way, would not think worth any Mortal's Notice. Curiosity is often as bewitching to the Rich, as Lucre to the Poor; and what Interest does in some, Vanity does in others; and great Wonders are often produced from a happy Mixture of both.⁵

David Hume, perhaps with Mandeville in mind, gave a somewhat different and more realistic, though not obviously more flattering, account of the motivation of authorship. In his account, avarice was not a supplement but a rival to curiosity, and acted as a barrier to the writing of books, presumably because more profitable activities were usually available:

...it is more easy to account for the rise and progress of commerce in any kingdom, than for that of learning...Avarice, or the desire of gain, is an universal passion, which operates at all times, in all places, and upon all persons. But curiosity, or the

love of knowledge, has a very limited influence, and requires youth, leisure, education, genius, and example, to make it govern any person. You will never want booksellers, while there are buyers of books. But there may frequently be readers where there are no authors.⁶

Hume in attributing specially to youth a yearning for knowledge, for scholarship, was generalizing from his own experience. As he wrote to a friend, in 1764:

I repent heartily my ever having committed anything to Print. Had I a Son I should warn him as carefully against the dangerous Allurements of Literature as K. James did his Son against those of women; tho' if his Inclination was as strong as mine in my youth, it is likely that the warning would be to as little Purpose in the one Case as it usually is [p.7] in the other.⁷

My role today is, of course, the reverse of Hume's. I am pleading for planned increase in the allurements of scholarship rather than for increased protection against them. And I plead on behalf of scholarship, not that it will save the world, although this has conceivably happened in the past and may happen again; not that it brings material rewards to the scholar, although this also may have occurred, to the scandal of his academic superiors; not that it is an invariably exciting activity, for it generally involves a great deal of drudgery, and, like diplomacy for Charles G. Dawes, is often indeed harder on the feet than on the head. All that I plead on behalf of scholarship, at least upon this occasion, is that, once the taste for it has been aroused, it gives a sense of largeness even to one's small quests, and a sense of fullness even to the small answers to problems large or small which it yields, a sense which can never in any other way be attained, for which no other source of human gratification can, to the addict, be a satisfying substitute, which gains instead of loses in quality and quantity and in pleasure-yielding capacity by being shared with others -- and which, unlike golf, improves with age.

To the objection that other needs are so pressing that we can't afford the time which scholarship calls for, I fear the answer which Robert Browning gave in his *A Grammarian's Funeral* would not now be acceptable:

What's time? Leave *Now* for dogs and apes!
Man has Forever.

It is not as easy today as in the good old days of Queen Victoria to believe that Man has Forever. But suppose we do steal from what time we do have some few hours for this less urgent business, surely no clear and present danger to our security or our prosperity or even the prosperity of our universities will result from such larceny.

Not that I would make an unqualified plea for all that is associated with the pursuit of scholarship, even when it is indulged in only minor doses. So modestly stocked as a rule are the closets of scholars -- unless they are of the medical profession --- that despite the smallness of these closets there is still room in them to conceal a few skeletons. I propose

to say a few words on the [p.8] skeletons of the scholars. But let those of the fraternity in our midst rest tranquil, for I will speak only of those of our skeletons which we parade before the reading public's gaze.

First, the lay public complains, with something short of complete lack of justification, that scholars have a tendency to pass off obscurity for profundity. A scholar of a kind and poet of a comparable kind, Sir Richard Blackmore, once published an ungenerous couplet on this theme:

Let idle Students on their Volumes pore
To cloud with Learning, what was clear before.⁸

To this I can make on behalf of the scholar only this feeble reply in kind:

Let unlearned laymen not be too sure,
That what seems simple, is not obscure.

Second, for some reason which I have never quite fathomed, laymen object to footnotes and quotations as if they were always blots ostentatiously or capriciously sprinkled on texts. Perhaps scholars should dispense with footnotes when writing for laymen. They should, of course, dispense with them when they are superfluous or can conveniently to the reader be incorporated in the text. There have been some extraordinary manifestations of what a non-scholar diagnosed as "foot-and-note-disease," and not all the redundant *ibids*, *op.cit.*, and *loc. cit.* have fallen under the vigilant eye of Frank Sullivan of the *New Yorker*. Hugo Grotius, for instance, was meticulously careful to append heavy documentation to such propositions of common notoriety as that man embraces woman; and the author of "Mother Goose's Melody", said to be Oliver Goldsmith, was poking fun at him when he attached as a footnote to his melody, as an alleged quotation from Grotius, the statement that "It is a mean and scandalous practice in authors to put notes to things that deserve no notice." There is also a somewhat famous footnote in an English book published in 1854, inserted "as a relief to the uniformity and matter of these pages," a footnote to end all footnotes, which extends from page 334 of the book to page 628.⁹

I wish I could persuade laymen, nonetheless, that footnotes and quotations in texts often perform useful functions, and not [p.9] only for scholars. Footnotes are frequently the only anchors of text to fact, the only obstacle to flights of imagination where what is called for is merely soberly accurate reporting. As for quotations, they are often the only tasty plums in the author's pudding as I would not have to depart far from my present text to provide an illustration. What irritates the laymen, I suspect, is frequently not the presence of the quotations but of the quotation *marks*. But scholars, and especially writers of doctoral dissertations, can omit these little marks only subject to great professional peril, for they are required to enable the reader to distinguish mere scholarship from creative writing.

Third, there is a special product of scholarship for which it is hard to find an excuse except that it is an occupational hazard of the scholar which it often requires severe self-discipline,

constant vigilance, and the aid of hostile critics completely to avoid. This is what Jeremy Bentham called "nonsense-on-stilts," a type of sophisticated nonsense, of ignorant learning, which only educated men are capable of perpetrating. A French wit has distinguished two types of learned balderdash, of "galimatias," the simple type where the author believes he understands what he is saying but cannot make it intelligible to his readers, and the compound type, where neither author nor readers can make anything of the text. I do not think it would be difficult to extend this classification so as to cover still other types, as, for example, where the readers think they understand but the author knows he doesn't, and it would not be difficult to find illustrations for all the types distinguished. Even with respect to highly technical subjects the layman can here make his own contribution to good scholarship by keeping his modesty under control; if after due application he fails to find a text addressed to laymen intelligible, he should hold in mind the bare possibility that the fault lies not with him but with the absence of meaningfulness in the text.

With the impatience of the layman or the members of other disciplines with a particular discipline's technical terms, however, I have only limited patience. True it is that the scholar needs to be watched lest he use technical jargon to conceal the absence [p.10] of precision, rather than in its service. But technical language, though never a sufficient condition of precision of thought, and sometimes a substitute for it, is often its necessary condition. I have friends who inadequately conceal their incredulity when I plead that to explain to them, for example, why I believe that it is sometimes to a country's advantage to have an unfavorable balance of trade, I would have to resort to technical terms. These same friends, however, on the slightest provocation, or even with no provocation at all, will blandly break into a very rash of technical jargon, totally incomprehensible to me, if it is a question why the runner was out at second base, or how to knit a baby sweater, or how to tell a yellow warbler from a canary.

I come now to the fourth and last of those of the scholar's skeletons which are fit matter for public discussion, at least among friends, to what I regard as the major barrier to the promotion of true scholarship in our graduate schools. This is the ever-growing specialization not only as between departments but even within departments, a specialization carried so far that very often professors within even the same department can scarcely communicate with each other on intellectual matters except through the mediation at seminars and doctoral examinations of their as yet incompletely specialized students. This development has not been capricious or without functions. The growth in the accumulation of data, in the refinement and delicacy of tools for their analysis so that great application and concentration are necessary for mastery of their use, has not only ended the day of the polymath with all knowledge for his province, but seems steadily to be cutting down the number of those who would sacrifice even an inch of depth of knowledge for a mile of breadth.

I am told, and do not disbelieve, that this intensive specialization is frequently necessary for discovery, and especially for the improvement of techniques of discovery. To be able to keep on

discovering things not known before it seems often to be necessary to work in a narrow groove, to look always straight ahead in that groove without even glances at the once delectable knowledge in one's scholarly neighbor's rival garden. For our liberal colleges [p.11] we preach synthesis of disciplines, breadth of view, and historical perspective, and in our liberal colleges there are still teachers who practice it. But when, by fellowships or other blandishments, we have enticed the college graduate into our graduate schools, we at once encourage him to grow the professional blinders which will confine his vision to the narrow research track, and we endeavor -- often successfully -- to make out of him a truffle-hound, or, if you prefer, a race-horse, finely trained for a single small purpose and not much good for any other. We then let him loose on the undergraduates.

There may be a real dilemma here. It may really be true that at least in many cases there is a genuine and sharp conflict between, on the one hand, effective training for discovery, which requires narrow specialization, and, on the other hand, training for broad scholarship, which requires more time, less concentration of interest, less exclusive infatuation with laboratory models whose charms are the product of art rather than of nature, than progress in research can afford.

I yield to no one in recognition of the importance to mankind of the training for research which our graduate schools administer. If in the last generation or so American research over a wide range of fields has come of age, I would claim for the American graduate schools a great share of the credit. If the only relationship between graduate schools and colleges consisted in the recruiting from the colleges of the students for the graduate schools, I could even reconcile myself, though reluctantly, to the existence under modern conditions of an inherent conflict between research and scholarship, between narrowly-specialized skills and broad learning, and I would let the graduate schools go on in their present course, and encourage scholarship to seek refuge elsewhere.

The graduate schools, however, train our college teachers as well as our researchers, and the graduate school faculties also teach in the colleges. The graduate schools, I repeat, tend to mould their students into narrow specialists, who see only from the point of view of their subject, or of a special branch of their [p.12] special subject, and fail to recognize the importance of looking even at their own subject from other than its own point of view. These students then acquire their doctoral degrees, on the strength of theses which have demonstrated to the satisfaction of their supervisors that they have adequately decontaminated their minds from any influences surviving from their undergraduate training in other fields than those occupied by their chosen discipline. They then find their way back to the colleges to transmit to the next generation the graduate school version of a liberal education, or how to see the world through the eye of a needle. I would not pause to emphasize that mechanical shuffling of college curricula or verbal relabeling of courses is not an effective antidote aggravated specialism in college teaching, were it not for my conviction that we often underestimate how very true, how very important, and how very much neglected, truisms can be.

Men are not narrow in their intellectual interests by nature; it takes special and rigorous training to accomplish that end. And men who have been trained to think from the point of view of one subject, will never make good teachers at the college level even in that subject. They may know exceedingly well the possibilities of that subject, but they will never be conscious of its limitations, or if conscious of them, will never have an adequate motive or a good basis for judging as to their consequence or extent.

Samuel Johnson once said, before the urgent need of saying it had become obvious: "the rights of nations and of kings sink into questions of grammar, if grammarians discuss them." Samuel Johnson certainly had no prejudice against grammar. I don't think, therefore, that I am being unduly generous to him, and I am at least making my quotation from him more relevant to my present purposes, if I interpret it as intended only as a warning to specialists not to reduce all issues to *mere* applications of their specialty. Pride in one's special subject matter is a virtue, not a vice. It is right and proper, and good to look upon, to see a tanner in love with leather and a carpenter in love with wood. But what a meager portion of the realm of the mind is covered even by the [p.13] proudest single subject! If only there is the will, how much of the rich realm of the human mind lies open for invasion, for the physicist beyond, beside, and behind nuclear fission, and for the economist in regions where the circulating medium is of more precious metal than even under the gold standard?

Robert Browning began his *A Grammarian's Funeral* with a dirge for scholarship:

Let us begin and carry up this Corpse,
Singing together,
.....
This is our master, famous calm and dead,
Borne on our shoulders.

Browning did not end on a mournful note, however, and neither will I. Ways can be found to harmonize training in professional skills with training in scholarship. They must be found. They will be found. They need not involve any change in the declared objectives of our graduate schools. They will involve, however, changes in their actual practice. What the required changes are is a matter for exploration and experimentation.

Our graduate schools are now turning out large new crops of doctors of learning, whose primary task it will be to rescue the world from the perils of war, of disease, of poverty, and of sin. In their moments of leisure, may they also give us a little thought to the ways by which scholarship, as an ornament of the peace and the prosperity they will be winning for us, might also be promoted.

NOTES

1. Virgidemiarum, Bk. IV, Satire VI [1599], *The Works of the Right Reverend Joseph Hall, D.D., Bishop of Exeter*, new edition (Oxford, 1863), IX, 649.

2. J.T. Merz, *A History of European Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh, 1903), II, 657.

3. Robert South, D.D., *Sermons Preached upon Several Occasions*. (Library of Old English Divines edition, New York, 1871), V, 11.

4. *Pensées*, 150.

5. *Fable of the Bees, Part II* [1729], F.B. Kaye, ed. (Oxford, 1924), II, 342.

[p.14]

6. *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, Green and Grose, eds. (London, 1898), I, 176.

7. J.Y. T. Grieg, ed., *The Letters of David Hume* (Oxford, 1932), I, 461.

8. "Solomon's Irony" [1714], in *A Collection of Poems on Various Subjects* (London, 1718), p.468.

9. [Christopher Walton,] *Notes and Materials for an Adequate Biography of the Celebrated Divine and Theosopher, William Law* (London, 1854).