

L 2. The Two Books That Influenced Me Most, Years Ago

I review them together here, first a book on education and then a book on making the modern mind. They could both contribute to many people's thinking today. Harlan M. Smith

The Meaning of a Liberal Education, by Everett Dean Martin

This is the book that was the most important book, the book that influenced my life the most when I read it early in my college career. Martin was the head of Cooper Union in New York City, an adult education institution. In this book, he was really spelling out his conception of what sort of educational process was involved in becoming an educated adult. The adjective liberal was not essential except perhaps to distinguish what he was writing about from technical training.

The book was written early in the 20th century, but I think Martin would claim that although what is known about the world, and needs to be known by an educated person changes a lot over time, that the most important things an educated person needs to learn are things about life that do not change as much. So one can identify educated persons, wise persons, in every period in history. This is what the book helped teach me.

In seeking real education, a person is seeking more than just knowledge, that is factual information. Seeking an EDUCATION is seeking wisdom. Book learning, though necessary and helpful, is often confined to providing current knowledge. Indeed what is knowledge at any one time is never final or complete.

To be sure we do not have to learn everything important in what used to be called "the school of hard knocks". We don't have to try everything ourselves to see what is true and what is not. Too many things would be fatal and end life if that was the only way to learn. Initially we each learn almost everything from others, some directly and some through books that can also impart some wisdom if we get smart enough to recognize it.

To be sure, in some countries, the school systems try to mould the minds of youth by teaching what the government or the educational authorities want the youth to believe. It is essentially propagandistic, not an effort to help students learn to think for themselves. No school system is as good as it ought to be, according to Martin in helping people learn how to think for themselves. That involves teaching them to be doubters, to reexamine whatever others believe and urge them to believe, whether it be in books or presented by their teachers or even by their peers. Peer pressure is one of the greatest obstacles to developing the ability to think for oneself.

Perhaps the most dangerous obstacle to overcome however is our own

self-interest. It is human nature from birth to want what we want when we want it, and maturity involves learning the unwisdom of that attitude. Not only do we need to accommodate to others in society, but we need to learn to evaluate carefully our wants and desires that are wise and those that are not.

By seriously thinking for ourselves we can all learn, and most of us do, to tell what is most worthwhile in life and what values or desires mislead us. The main question is whether we learn this sort of wisdom soon enough or only somewhat later than we needed it. The sooner we learn what is most worth knowing and worth doing the better. But wisdom, like knowledge, is inexhaustible--it can always be increased. An educated person is then not one who has acquired all the wisdom possible, but one who fairly wise but always becoming wiser. That requires the person to always be on the lookout for everything that can be learned from others and by further independent thinking that is relevant to their individual beliefs or to any situation in which society finds itself.

The Making of the Modern Mind
A Survey of the Intellectual Background of the Present Age
by John Herman Randall, Jr.

There is no way that I can, in a short review of the book, give you any real idea of the detailed discussion of the dialectic evolution of ideas the book treats or the intellectual sophistication of the author. All I can say is that for the young man that I was when I read it, Randall was a wonderful revelation of much of our intellectual background. In his introduction, he states that "Ideas are much more lasting than anything else in man's civilization". Immediately I wanted this to be my field of study, and have always been somewhat disappointed that I could not make it so along with the social sciences that later engaged me fully.

This type of a history could have started with the Greece of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, but most historians see little intellectual development to write about from then until centuries later, when Western Europe rediscovered the ancient Greeks, and did so then in the midst of a quite different Medieval civilization.

So Randall starts this history with the intellectual outlook of the Medieval world of Western Europe, where human life in the visible world was viewed primarily as a drama of salvation. The chief end of humans was viewed as eternal life in an invisible world. Everything was seen through Christian religious glasses provided by the church. Augustine's "City of God" book epitomizes this intellectual world. The monastic life was upheld as an ideal. And monasteries became the sole repositories of ancient learning.

Lay society was feudal in structure, with peasants tillers of the soil at

the bottom, serving lords and ladies who held knightly ideals. In the middle were guilds of different types of artisans.

A strong intellectual tie to ancient Greece was made by a leading 13th century Christian scholar, Thomas Aquinas.

Although history does not have sharp breaks, the second section of Randall's book contrasts the world that followed the Medieval world with the Renaissance & its more humanistic outlook. The 16th century Protestant Reformation was however not more humanistic but a rising individualistic belief that salvation was to be found in a direct relation between the individual soul and God. Randall interestingly compares some of the Protestant leaders who then established different church denominations with no allegiance to the Pope.

The emergence of centralized nations with their own ideology out of a feudal structure is discussed.

Then Randall returned to the difference between the scholastic intellectual world, starting with authorities and reasoning by syllogism, with the beginnings of more scientific methods of learning more about nature.

The third section of the book deals with 17th and 18th century thought in several fields: religion, natural science, government, and humanitarianism. Among other things, the chapter on religion deals with a Deistic attack on revelation and with the growth of religious rationalism.

The Newtonian mathematical picture of nature as a big machine whose behavior is experimentally verifiable is contrasted with more modern science.

The social sciences begin with early writings in sociology and economics. In the field of government the idea of absolute monarchy is replaced by the more democratic thinking of Thomas Locke, Rousseau and Jefferson. Morality begins to be treated as subject to reason, humanitarianism is born and the idea of progress becomes popular.

The final section of the book covers the 19th century and the early part of the 20th. The book was published in 1926. Unfortunately I know of no book that carries the analysis through the 20th century with the broad scope employed by Randall. The titles of the chapters in this section of the book tell its scope and in parentheses I note some main ideas treated: The romantic protest against the age of reason (faith and reason), The conflict of social ideals to 1848 (conservatism and liberalism), The world conceived as a process of growth and evolution (progress and mechanistic science), The science of man in the growing world (growth of the social sciences), Religion in the growing world (fundamentalism and liberalism), Philosophical reactions to the growing world of mechanism (aesthetics instead of mechanistic world outlook), and Social ideas in the growing world (labor ideals & middle-class ideals, cosmopolitanism). (If anyone knows of a good book to update all this, please let me know. Write me at home in Roseville MN.)