

LIBRARY OR LABORATORY ?

Herbert L. Johnston

It has long been a truism that this is an age of specialization. A certain amount of specialization is inevitable; in order to become expert in any field of activity a man must sacrifice extensive knowledge of other fields. But it is possible to have too much of a good thing, and specialization carries with it certain definite dangers. The scholastic world is only one of many in which these dangers have become realities. Time was when, in the service of theology, the most sublime of all the sciences, philosophy performed the function of ordering all other branches of knowledge to their proper ends, while leaving each autonomous in its own field. But since the break-up of Christian wisdom in the 15th and 16th centuries the particular sciences have more and more turned autonomy into complete independence, until today each pursues its own course with little or no regard for its relation to other sciences and for its place in the general scheme of human knowledge. The complete modern divorce of politics from ethics is an obvious example of this trend. When the regulating control of metaphysics was thrown overboard, there went with it the balance between what may roughly be classified as the physical and the social sciences. For a variety of reasons, too varied and complex to be discussed here, the western world turned its attention away from man's relations with God to man's relations with the physical world, from the higher part of man, which he shares with the angels, to the lower part of man, which he shares with the brutes, from the spiritual to the material. But man is an exile from the heavenly city who retains his sense of direction in this world only as long as he keeps his eyes fixed on the gates of heaven; when he turns his gaze downward and tries to build here a lasting home, he immediately loses his way. For five centuries, more or less, men have been wandering aimlessly, without a guide; they have brought physical nature more and more under their control, but can do nothing better with that knowledge than kill each other more efficiently. They have discarded the unifying and directing influence of philosophy; they have lost the balance between what we

are calling the physical and the social sciences, and have over-specialized in the former at the expense of the latter.

This shifting of interest, which has continued at an increasing rate during the 19th and the 20th centuries, has found expression in most university curricula, particularly in America. More and more of the budget of these institutions is devoted to equipment for the pursuit of the physical sciences, more and more of their students are specializing in these fields. The emphasis is on understanding the material world in which men live rather than the men who live in it. The proper study of mankind is no longer man. The students are leaving the library for the laboratory.

When he leaves the library the student turns his back on the books in which are recorded the human wisdom of the centuries. He loses theology, which would teach him his relation to God and his true relation to the world in which he is so interested, which would direct his spiritual life and show him the only purpose which makes his existence intelligible. He loses philosophy, which would show him his own nature and proper activity as far as human reason can know them. He loses the knowledge that politics and economics are branches of the science of ethics which direct men's actions in organizing their civil life and in acquiring and using wealth. He loses historical knowledge of man's achievements in the past, and with it a sense of perspective without which the institutions and trends of thought of the present day can never be fully understood. He loses the glories of literature and the other fine arts, KEAT'S "realms of gold", in which are enshrined in words of enduring loveliness man's hopes and dreams and love of beauty. He loses, in a word, all hope of understanding himself and other men, for he turns his back on the spiritual, the more truly human side of man, and concentrates on those things that concern his body.

When he steps into the laboratory the student enters a world in which the proper study of mankind is matter. In the studies which he there undertakes, studies which alone are today dignified by the name of science, he must adopt the coldly analytical and impersonal attitude proper to the investigation of material phenomena. This scientific method is applied, and properly so, not only to the study of inorganic matter, but also in such sciences as biology, anatomy, and physiology, which deal with the material part of man. Such study is useful and necessary, but specialization in such

sciences and methods may and often does lead to harmful results. The first of these is that the habit of investigating only the material portion of man leads many, at best, to disregard man's spiritual nature and, at worst, to deny its existence. The second is that the method of the laboratory, eminently successful in dealing with matter, is extended to other spheres to which it does not properly apply because it is the only method these men know. The laboratory method has proved successful; so let us apply it to every field. The laboratory has made us rich; so let us neglect the library.

This is not to say that laboratory research and investigation of the material universe are to be ruled out as useless pursuits. Every increase in knowledge is good in itself. But it is to say that too great specialization in the physical sciences, symbolized in the laboratory, has led, once the guiding hand of philosophy was thrown off, to a neglect of the social sciences, symbolized in the library. Specialization in this direction has been partly a result and partly a further cause of the general growth of a materialistic outlook, and has had definite repercussions on our everyday life.

Even in nominally Christian countries man is generally regarded as simply another piece of matter, more highly organized than most. England's poet laureate has described the picture of himself that man receives from the scientists:

"What am I, Life? A thing of watery salt
Held in cohesion by unresting cells, . . ."

There has been widespread acceptance of Marx's materialistic interpretation of history according to which "In every historical epoch, the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange, and the social organization necessarily following from it, form the basis upon which is built up, and from which alone can be explained, the political and intellectual history of that epoch." Philosophy, science, art, all the achievements of the human spirit, are merely "superstructures" raised on and intimately dependent upon a material foundation.

This materialistic view largely prevails in our industrial life. The machine has become the master; the man who operates it is not a person but, in that horrible and revealing phrase, a "hand". Men are not the important thing; the purpose of their existence, like that of the other machines, is to produce more material wealth. Production, not consump-

tion, things, not men are the reason for which the economic process exists. Even the labour unions, formed to protect the rights of the workers, themselves violate those rights by enforcing the closed shop policy to dragoon men, regardless of their personal preferences, into a single big union. Again men are not persons with minds and wills of their own; they are numerable, impersonal ciphers which pay dues and cast votes.

The same situation exists in political life. The totalitarian states have drawn the logical consequences from the view that man is just another part of the material world by subjecting him entirely to the state and denying him any inherent rights whatever. And, of course, if the spiritual element of man's nature either does not exist or does not matter, Hitler and Stalin are right. And although those other countries, called democratic and Christian, have not as yet become so logical in the application of their materialism to life, they are moving steadily in that direction. The legalizing of adultery under the name of divorce will lead to the legalizing of abortion under the name of birth control, to an unnamable crime perpetrated against the helpless under the name of sterilization, to the murder of innocents under the name of mercy killing, to all the darker horrors associated with Hitler's nightmare notion of breeding a super race. This, in the current euphemism, is the planned society, not as most of the planners picture it today, but as it will inevitably become if the spiritual side of man continues to be neglected. The Spartans had a "planned society" somewhat like this one. They planned for war, and actually succeeded in defeating the Athenians. But for nearly twenty five centuries Athens has been one of the brightest lights of the western world, while all that Sparta has left us is the salutary example of an experiment in futility.

In spite of that example, in spite of the lessons of history that men no longer read, the democratic post-war planners, themselves sold on the Axis brand of "efficiency," are busy laying the foundations of a vast planned economy. Here again is the method of the laboratory in which "Domestic affairs gain momentum as they approach the technician's utopia when a succession of 'security' plans will have made citizens into guinea pigs for the grand scale experiments of commissars under the laboratory conditions guaranteed by a secret police." We have not yet reached that condition, but we are well on the road. At best we are heading for

paternalism and at worst for tyranny. And why should rulers feel paternal towards beings who are, according to the general view, only complex bits of matter?

The only force that will reverse the present trend is the full realization, in practice as well as in theory, of the true nature of man. Man is not just an individual, a thing; he is a person, made to the image of God, with an intellect to grasp the truth and a will to choose the good, with an immortal soul and an eternal destiny.

Man remains a person in his industrial life. The production of wealth exists for man, not man for the production of wealth. Material goods are not an end in themselves but a means of serving man's physical and spiritual welfare. As a worker, man is not just another impersonal part of the means of production; he is a person entitled to belong to any legitimate union of his own choice and to be a full partner, along with other men representing management and ownership, in the business enterprise to which he contributes his labour.

Man remains a person in his political life. The state exists for man, not man for the state. Even in democratic nations, in which that principle is recognized in theory, the individual citizen has a negligible influence on the course of political action. He may, by combining with enough of his fellows, oust one set of politicians and substitute another; but the interests that line the party chests of both sets still pull the strings that make the puppets dance. If a new representative system based on community of occupational interests were substituted for the present one based on the mechanical counting of the noses of men with the most diverse interests who happen to live in the same district, a democratic society might be considerably nearer realization.

Man remains a person in his social life. Society is not a mechanical mixture of men as a sand-hill is a mechanical mixture of grains of sand; it is a homogeneous union of men as an organism is a homogeneous union of living cells. Men are more than bricks in a wall; they are brothers, brothers in Christ because sons of God, and their union in the human family is simply an extension of the integral unity of the individual family.

Which view will we take of man? Which world do we wish to live in? The choice is ours: spirit or matter, man or machine, freedom or slavery, library or laboratory.