

Noncommittal Professorial Impartiality

Winner of the February ESSAY CONTEST (held under examination conditions). Slight mechanical refurbishing by Mr. Feaver has been permitted.

Of all the bastard children of Science, none has done so much mischief, vitiated more thinking, sapped more energy, and wrought more confusion than a pseudo-intellectual attitude of "non-committal professorial impartiality". A doubtful child of its reputed parent at best, it has nevertheless assumed to itself all the desirability, all the glamour and all the fashionableness of its alleged father.

It may be defined as that state of mind which is unable, or (what is worse) unwilling to make a decision. It is not the antithesis of credulity, as it so fondly claims, but of belief. It is the opposite of intellectual courage, moral or otherwise. Its usual excuse for existence is the vastness of knowledge as yet unknown. This "vast unknown" apparently discredits the "vast known".

"But," someone may object, "is not a scientist impartial? Must he not discard all prejudice? Why an education at all if we can make up our minds on partial evidence?"

Even if this were a true picture of the attitude of the scientist, is this "impartiality" a contribution that science can make to other spheres of thought? Can a philosopher with his rational processes, or a theologian with his revelation of God be impartial? Yet there are so many voices, so many "ways"! Because there is confusion, the seducer whispers, there is no reality; one must always "reserve judgment". Rather make no decision and be neither praised nor blamed than make a false one and be laughed at. And so another victim is overcome with intellectual paralysis.

Impartiality is wrong when it becomes valued "per se". Belief is the goal to which all knowledge should tend. Granted that such a belief must be true: that is, in accordance with fact or reality, it still remains that without it nothing can be done. May I shock our philosopher by saying that judged by almost any standards even belief based on false premises is to be preferred to no belief at all? Pragmatically it is obvious that belief however misplaced, will provide the starting point, direction, goal and impetus to achieve which is denied the unbeliever. But whenever the means,—impartiality—is worshipped instead of the end,—belief—we have intellectual paralysis.

Probably the greatest tragedy in modern intellectualism is the vast number of people who do not know what is so, though they are quick to say what they know is not so. "But we are being scientific," they say,—we have learned so much that we know nothing". It apparently is a kind of ignorance to be proud of. They refuse to drink from a cup, and so die of thirst, because their superior education has made them aware of the fact that there are other ways of drinking they haven't learned yet.

To return to my argument let me emphasize again that decisions must eventually be made. The very act of living demands the continuous exercise of the judgment based on belief. We board the street-car because we believe that it will take us to our journey's end; we choose a street to turn down because we

believe that it will take us to the college as it has done in the past. The fact that we are ignorant of the street-car operator's ability, the composition of the mechanism, the possibility of a strike of street-car employees, does not prevent us from making a decision and profiting thereby. Not so the 'impartial intellectual' who by the fact that he spends valuable years or valuable money (depending on what he values) studying some subject "in the pursuit of truth", admits that it is important, yet who refuses to make up his mind. Inability to reach a conclusion demands that steps be taken to rectify the situation, not that such inability should be glorified as an achievement in itself. Education is meaningless if the result is to be proud of an inability to believe anything, in other words to know anything.

As Socrates explained to Euthyphro, men do not quarrel over something that can be measured, such as the relative height of two objects. A measuring stick would settle the argument. However in a question of values our measuring stick is harder to find and contention arises. Yet belief in the latter case is no less necessary, though harder, than in the former. The form is the case for the scientist, the latter for the intellectual. But what of our alleged scientific impartiality? The scientist is only impartial to the extent that until he has applied his measuring stick to his two objects he takes no sides. After measuring them to cling to "impartiality" would class him as a fool. He must be partial on the side of truth. Nor is he strictly unprejudiced. On the contrary he is prejudiced as to the validity and authority of his measuring stick. Without that prejudice he is helpless. Doubtless it may have taken him years to learn how to use his measuring stick, but he would not be satisfied until he could. Just so must the intellectual, the liberal arts student, so regard the problem of values that he faces. He is studying his "measuring sticks", reason, for philosophical values, faith, for values of revelation. He may examine the authority and validity of his standards, but if in the end he refuses to apply his "sticks" to problems lest he become "partial", or "dogmatic" or loses all faith in them lest he become "prejudiced" his education has been a colossal waste.

Because of this, "tolerance" is one of the most dangerous of the fashionable virtues. As long as it is a recognition that force is wrong when ideas differ, it is good. Instead, however, it has become the banner for the victims of "impartiality", and implies that there is no black and white, that both sides of a question are equally valid, that contradictions in terms may both be true and so on. Believing nothing themselves, they graciously allow anyone to state what he believes, but insist that he also allow the opposite of what he believes to be true as well. For example, it is my personal belief that without the experience of spiritual rebirth or conversion, one has no right to the name Christian. (That belief, by the way, has been achieved by the measuring stick of "revelation". However, I have subjected my "stick" to the scrutiny of reason and experience, and for that reason am admittedly prejudiced as to its authority.) But grant me that belief, and must I not also equally believe it negatively: that all who do not agree are wrong? I must be impartial, yes, until my measuring stick has been applied; but I must apply the stick, and I must make my decision or my impartiality is mere nihilism. I must examine my stick, I must check its validity, I must discard it if faulty, but I must have a stick, and I must be prejudiced as

to is value and authority. Toleration in an adding machine would be disastrous. It can be no less so in the fields of morality, religion, ethics and the like.

In the restricted sense that the term is usually used today "science" is the art of measuring, testing, and using physical facts. There are few today who deny that something exists beyond physical fact. Even those who deny their "reality" cannot deny at least the existence of ideas about 'good' and 'bad', 'God' and so on. Perhaps they are illusions, perhaps not, but they exist, and they are not physical, and it is at least reasonable to investigate their validity as of any other fact whether physical or not.

As I have tried to point out, not even the scientist is impartial and unprejudiced in his approach to the universe. His impartiality is purely temporary, ceasing when his test has been made. He does not so value his impartiality as to refuse to make the test. His prejudice on the question of the authority of his instrument is positive, dogmatic and necessary. That explains his success. If the intellectuals have worked themselves into a fog, have found themselves in a morass of inertia it is just because in spite of their loud trumpetings about "tolerance" and the "scientific attitude of impartiality" they have not understood their function. They have become so in love with their tool that they never use it to carve out a belief. There is no virtue in not believing; it is a cause of regret. Any study which results in no belief is an educational defeat. Merely naming that defeat a victory does not make it one. And to be proud of chronic non-committal impartiality is deriving petty spoils from a costly failure.

The world today stands in desperate need of leadership in the fields of values. Only belief can lead; unbelief is static. Belief in the wrong things will lead—but to disaster. Belief in the truth, whether arrived at empirically by science, rationally by philosophy, or by faith through revelation and personal experience in theology, must be our aim. If our studies fail to show us some basis for belief—we might as well face it—we have been wasting our time. Impartiality by itself is criminal negligence.

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Forgetting

Each brittle moment crumbling underfoot
Cries out its instant life, then quickly dies,
And all the tortured faith that we may put
Into forgetting, we, in retrospect, despise;
Yet progress is our soul—the hastening breath
That warms the air within this friendless space—
In such despairing we should soon find Death,
And Living is the only knowledge of our race;
We dare not stop who seek no other fear
Than Life's engulfing terror, lest we lose
The instant glory of one fragment here,—
This wilful tumult leaves no time to rest or choose;
And Hope shall go careening on, until
It finds we are the moments that we kill.

L. LESTER WAGAR