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Professorial Ethics

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PROFESSORIAL ETHICS

We are aware that a lawyer, by the very nature of his profession, comes into peculiar relations with his clients, and therefore with other lawyers, with the courts, and with the outside world. By reason of the trust that is reposed in him, there are many things which he might do in an underhand way to gain personal advantage. All this, however, has been in some degree rectified by the development of a code of professional ethics, of such character that the man who offends against it is damaged by a certain loss of caste. The physician, in like manner, has to a marked degree the trust and the ear of his patients; and he might gain many an unfair advantage, either by betraying the confidences of his patients or by using his opportunity to foster damaging estimates concerning the skill of other physicians, his natural rivals. But here again the code of professional ethics becomes clear and explicit. The honourable man is thus warned concerning the things which he should not do by reason of his peculiar professional situation; and the man of less keen moral susceptibilities may even feel as a threat the strong class consciousness that is in this way called into action.

Now does the university service possess a distinctive professional code comparable with these? If so, what are some of its characteristics?

It is evident, I think, that the academic service is much less clear in the matter. In fact, I have sometimes been in doubt whether a faculty man, in order to discern his duty in any given case, really needs anything more than the sincere purpose of an honourable man; in doubt, I mean, whether we require or largely make use of an organised system of taboos placed ready at our hand by a developed class consciousness. And yet something of this kind seems to be often in evidence—sometimes, indeed, in a very beneficial manner. In order to see its nature a little more distinctly, we need to analyse briefly the relations which members of a faculty bear to one another, and the peculiar obligations which arise from the very organisation and structure of a modern university.

It is clear that the professor has a peculiar influence over his

students, partly by reason of the respect in which they hold his advice upon personal matters, and partly by reason of his power to indoctrinate them with his own fond opinions. It is evident, too, that this influence is a source of advantage to himself; and from this fact arises the temptation, in manifold forms, to foster it by unfair methods and to use it for unfair ends. And then again, there are placed in his hands the reputations and to a certain degree the interests and destinies of his colleagues, who are also in some sense his competitors. He will of necessity influence the rating of these men, and the breadth of appeal of the subjects they are administering; and it lies near at hand to exercise this influence in a manner dictated by his personal interests.

We first meet our students in a personal way, many times in discussion concerning their projected courses of study. They desire our advice about wise selections and the studies that are best worth while. And here at once is presented a series of ethical crises for the professor, of which the student is usually quite unaware. The intellectual interests of a lifetime, familiarity, and appreciation, all combine with personal profit to emphasise one's own topic and its related courses. And indeed, the subject is a vital one, concerning the significance of which the student is at the moment in good faith making inquiry. The student *wants* its best meaning to be made known to him. Why should we not stress it? And yet if we do so in disproportionate manner, we are yielding to some of the most unlovely forms of the self-seeking impulse, are outraging the real meaning of the student's request for wise advice, and are taking a distinctly unfair advantage of our colleagues. The only consideration that could possibly make it seem fair is the cynical reflection that while I am influencing this student my rival over the way is also making hay to the best of his ability with whatever material happens to come in *his* way.

Now while we deprecate this situation, I do not see that we find it very possible to set the dogs of academic ethics upon the offenders in these matters. And our hesitation does not arise entirely, perhaps, from a budding appreciation of the measure of truth contained in the old theological dogma that if perfect justice were done we should all be damned. The fact is that the situation is so complex that we simply cannot get at it with a code consciousness. These subjects that we handle *are* signifi-

cant, and their significance *ought* to be made known. The elements in the situation which at one time are entirely unfair may at another time, with only a slight change in environment, become entirely proper. It is a well-known fact that a law which cannot be enforced, or an ethical precept which cannot be applied, will cease to have binding force.

And yet, even if we cannot develop an academic code in this matter as definite or binding as that of the lawyer or the physician, that does not mean that the offence is to be passed over, or that we should allow the conscienceless self-seeker to have his way without let or check. Can we not vigorously maintain the demand that every man who exercises this function shall bring to it the alert conscience of an honourable man, imbued with a high purpose? The man who assumes to influence the curriculum of a student, and thus to condition his whole life and thought, has entered upon holy ground. And if the members of any faculty come to learn that in any one of their colleagues an attitude exists which knows nothing of this, may they not vigorously bring to bear against such an one the pressure of censure on grounds of academic ethics? Indeed, I think we should add something still further. The man who is to influence courses of study should possess not only the moral qualities of honour and fairness, but also the intellectual qualities of breadth of view and appreciation of the deeper meaning of culture and of a modern university. I think that as a group we may maintain the spirit of these demands in a broad way, and sink it deeply into the consciousness of the members of the university teaching staff; although for the carrying out of this spirit in complex detail we must still fall back, I suppose, upon the personal rectitude of each individual.

After the student has chosen his course, he next feels the professor's influence through the content of the things that are taught. And here a certain latitude of selection, often a very wide latitude, is within the professor's power. The ethical problems involved at this point deal largely with the motives and objectives which should control such selection.

In the modern university the pressure to build up a reputation for creative research and originality is tremendous. In this way many a professor is led so to organise his courses that he may bring in a large amount of his own writing and thinking. In the extreme form of this activity some courses amount to

little more than studies of the personal opinions of the professor; while there is an abundance of milder forms in which the fads and fancies of the professor have greatly overlaid the body of truth that is of general acceptability. Courses of this nature, like a debased currency, soon cease to have a standard value; and the matter may amount to a very genuine abuse, in which the interests of the student are sacrificed to the vanity or private welfare of the professor.

In dealing with this situation, we should probably find it unwise and impossible to exclude the theories that are unique and original. In particular, the rare man should clearly stand far above such a law. But it seems wise to hold before all the moral obligation which we are under to teach the "truth," in the sense of the body of doctrine generally accepted, approved, and standardised. Whatsoever is more than this should always be clearly presented before the student in the light of personal opinion, and except in the case of the rare man should not bulk so large as to threaten the standard quality of the course.

On the other hand, professors may sometimes influence the choices of students even before coming into personal contact with them. The methods employed for this purpose, or at least a portion thereof, go by the name of *advertising*. The situation is not free from its ambiguities and perplexities. It is rather clear that some kinds of advertising are entirely legitimate. That which comes from the development of a considerable body of students who gladly say, "I got a great deal out of that course," seems greatly to be commended. If what the students say is, "I found that course mighty easy," one has less enthusiasm. In general, however, it would seem that any favourable fame which issues from the merit of the subject directly, or from excellence in its administration, and which can grow of itself without stimulants from the doctor is to be regarded as sound and worthy. It is desirable, in fact, that desirable things shall be known as desirable. But wherever the professor has to use adventitious means, and in particular where he reverts to the cheap tricks of commercial advertising, then the academic consciousness may well become alert. Getting one's name into the papers and before the student vision on every occasion and no occasion, cultivating athletics with an ulterior motive, canvassing for students—well, these things indicate depths of depravity that are now happily rather rare upon every well-

regulated campus. Perhaps most university men are rather too diffident, indeed, concerning any form of public recognition which may seem to depend in any degree upon their own personal and deliberate efforts. At least I am sure that some horns are not sounded so loudly as they might well be, while the more strident noises that sometimes make themselves heard so readily are liable in a relatively short time to "move into another street."

When we turn to consider the more direct relations that faculty men bear to one another, we are met at once by the fact that to a remarkable degree they have in keeping one another's reputations. And this is a very serious matter—a matter to which, I regret to say, many men are never adequate. It is so readily possible, by carping criticism, sarcasm, or that delightful form of speech which the darkey called "insinuendo," to bring into doubt the standing and merits of men even of very genuine and substantial worth, that I think we are justified in turning against this whole business with the same vigour we should use in stamping out a nest of rattlesnakes. The lower stages of this vice, I suppose, are manifested in a certain haughtiness regarding men in other universities. One may refuse to recognise their merits, and brand them as "asses." I confess that when, as sometimes happens in academic circles, I hear this designation applied to some absent professor, I experience a revulsion of feeling. I remember that even a rattlesnake warns its victim before it strikes. I am sure that we are using a very poor means of honouring our own university, if we are inconsiderate of the earned reputations and genuine worth of men in other institutions.

Of course, the other side of the story is that we *must* judge men and reputations, and must make our judgment effective. Further, our standards may properly be high, provided only they be not unreasonably so. Here, again, it would seem that the possession of a genuinely honourable spirit is the root of the matter, and that it is difficult to formulate specifically academic rules. Yet the opportunities for quiet and sly knifing in academic life are so manifold, the temptation is so ever present, and I fear the usage is so common, that I am willing to unloose the hounds of professional ethics at this kind of thing and to urge them on with special vigour.

When we look at the situation within any given university,

complexities multiply. Cliques and alliances have formed, personal antagonisms and professional rivalries have become acute, and even differences of theoretical estimation concerning scientific or philosophical questions have often developed into matters that bear in an important way upon the very life-work of this professor or of that; while behind it all is ever the struggle for larger relative influence with the students. Now we are meeting in our classrooms and in our offices, all the time, the results of our colleagues' work, as they are presented in the views and training of our students. We must of necessity estimate this work which we thus see in its results; and it often turns upon ideas divergent in some ways from our own. In our own classrooms we are inculcating our own views. How inevitable that we should express a depreciatory estimate of the other view; and how natural that this should creep back into a reflection upon the competence of the other man. To use a phrase from childhood, we "deny the allegation, and defy the alligator." And an alligator that is not present *in propria persona* is not so very difficult to defy; but some people find it difficult to draw the line between a proper and necessary analysis of ideas, on the one hand, and a personal insinuation and reflection, on the other. And then, as we pass from our classrooms, to close conference with our trusty friends, we express still more freely what we really thought. And the damage is done.

Now I do not care to deny that some men sometimes need to be harshly judged. Some kings should be driven from the throne by force of arms. But when we appreciate to what degree personal interest is likely to enter into the harsh judgment we are tempted to make of a colleague, and what a damnable thing it is to strike him behind his back in order to secure a petty advantage or satisfaction for ourselves, I think we shall learn to be more thoughtful and restrained in this matter. And shall we not foster a spirit which will make every man feel that he is losing standing with all decent fellows, as soon as he displays anything but kindly consideration for the reputations of his colleagues? I have understood that there are still several universities in which such a spirit could be developed to advantage.

Aside from the matter of reputation and personal attitude, there are certain other relations which issue from the official organisation of a university; for instance the relation of deans

and members of the faculty, or of president and heads of departments, and in particular the relations of the head of departments to the subordinate members of the departmental staff. When we shall all have learned both to command and to obey, I suppose this subject will present very little difficulty. In the meantime I conceive that this relation may differ somewhat, according to the nature of the department and the departmental staff. In idea, however, it seems to me that the state universities of the mid-west are passing through a stage of incomplete organisation, towards a condition of complete organisation; and that the nature of the authority which may properly be exercised by the head of a department is undergoing a corresponding change. During the stage of incomplete organisation the subordinates in the department are young men, low in rank and salary, and presumably inferior in point of ripeness of scholarship and maturity of influence. In that case, the head is responsible for the order and tone of his department as a whole, and may properly dress the work throughout it all. As we approach more nearly a developed university, however, it must come about that to a greater and greater degree subordinate men will be still mature scholars, attached to the institution for life; men entirely competent to arrange their own work, presumably more competent, indeed, in some phase of the department, than is its titular head. This is now the situation, of course, in the large eastern universities. When this condition of more complete organisation is reached, I suppose that the departmental staff will work together more nearly as a board of equals, as is the usage now in certain great universities. The co-ordination of the department's work is of course a necessary objective, and would doubtless be sought by all, or could be enforced by the head. But in the long run it is inconceivable that this little matter should be made the ground for allowing one mature scholar to exercise over another mature scholar an authority which might penetrate deeply into the nature of the latter's life-work and life-plans.

Now it is scarcely possible, in a brief discussion like this, even to touch upon all of our most delicate ethical problems: the situations are too complicated. May we not demand, however, that our university men shall become vividly conscious of the temptations to unfairness that beset us in so many ways in our university environment, and shall determine, each man

for himself, that he will not do those things? The university professor's function is a consecrated one, by virtue of its intellectual leadership, its profound and worthy influence, and the spirit of justice which must be exemplified in its dealing with the students. Shall we not each catch the vision of its splendid significance, and resolve that no action of ours under the influence of personal motive shall sully the honour which ought to grace this noble function? Shall we not indeed *organise* this high estimate into a communal consciousness that shall shame into acquiescence any poor unfortunate who may be unable to discern the deeper meanings of things? If so, that will be our Professorial Ethics; but it appeals to me not so much as a class code, as the essential idealism of the noble work to which our lives are dedicated.

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