Engineers and the Grand Inquisitor

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Much can be said in a general, abstract way about the aims and objectives of humanities courses. Impressive arguments can be marshalled in support of the conclusion that humanities are a Good Thing, that any university student can benefit from being brought in contact with masterpieces of literature, history, philosophy, or art. One could couple such a general treatment of this question with an earnest plea that somehow the future spiritual health and well-being of society depend on our having partaken sufficiently of the moral vitamins deposited in the cultural treasures of the human tradition. Thus, for example, Mr. John Ciardi, in a Saturday Review editorial, [January 31, 1959], claimed that literature needs no defense, "There is no question of defending literature. It defends us. Without its voices in us, we are all indefensible."

Such general appeals are no doubt helpful and effective, especially when they come from the pen of such a gifted writer as Mr. Ciardi. But they frequently sound like reports of men who have come from a beautiful, strange land and are eager to entice others to visit it as well. It is difficult to contemplate the unseen, or even to recognize the familiar in unfamiliar abstractions. It may be easier to talk about the charms and values of the Land of Humanities if one brings along a sample, a concrete illustration of what one is talking about.

This is the procedure I intend to follow. I shall try to present one item that could be a part in a course in literature, or philosophy, or psychology, or political science. I have chosen it because it easily fits into any of these contexts and therefore could be regarded as a typical "humanities datum." We shall try to look at this datum together and then speculate whether it is a datum worth knowing and studying, even by an engineering student.

I have in mind a story of the Grand Inquisitor as told by one of the characters in Dostoyevsky's novel, The Brothers Karamazov. It is presented as a legend, or a poem with a point. The story, very briefly, is this. It takes place in the sixteenth century A.D. On a hot summer day Jesus Christ appears on the streets of Seville, Spain. Just a short while ago one hundred heretics have been burnt at the stake by the Inquisition. Jesus is immediately recognized by people in the streets. He blesses them and performs miracles, resurrecting the dead and healing the sick. He is noticed and recognized by the Grand Inquisitor, who immediately orders the guards to seize Jesus and to put Him in jail. During the night He visits the prisoner and presents his reasons for his action. This is the most important part of the story.

The Grand Inquisitor believes that Jesus' first appearance on earth was a disaster. He came to men to give them His gift of freedom. But He did not realize that men are not capable of living in freedom. Freedom means carrying the burdens of choice, and keeping one's conscience. Freedom means self-reliance in adversity, and courage in the face of uncertainty and peril; it also means willingness to forgive others and to sacrifice oneself. But did Jesus know what kind of creature He was addressing in His sermons? Obviously not, as the subsequent centuries have shown. Man is by nature weak, vicious, and rebellious. He wants no freedom; he only wants miracles, mystery, and authority. He needs someone to give him his bread, his amusements, and to take over his problems of conscience. He is incapable of carrying on his own shoulders the burdens of conscience and choice, and he will sell his freedom to anyone who will take it from him on these terms.

By having put before men His high, demanding ideals, Christ made them even more miserable. Congenitally not capable of accepting freedom, they have floundered in their inner weakness and chaos, and were all too glad to surrender their freedom to the Church in exchange for bread and authority. They are much happier now, adds the Grand Inquisitor. They prefer to remain in this state of relative physical security and spiritual surrender. The Church has corrected Christ's mistake and has given men the only happiness they are capable of: the happiness of the weak. It would be a crime against humanity to preach again to men the gospel of freedom and sacrifice. To prevent this the Grand Inquisitor has imprisoned Jesus and was even prepared to burn Him at the stake. He bids Christ to leave Seville and never to return to earth. Christ kisses the Inquisitor on his pale lips and leaves the prison.

It is very important not to misjudge the Grand Inquisitor's motives. The author of the story is at great pains to present this man's inner thoughts to us and leaves no room for doubting his sincerity. There is no question about the Grand Inquisitor's burning desire to be a benefactor to mankind. He is genuinely struck by the suffering which men undergo while grappling with the problems which freedom imposes on them. The Grand Inquisitor loves humanity; in fact, his charge against Jesus is that Jesus did not love men enough, otherwise He would not have put before them such frustrating, impossible ideals. Furthermore, life is no bed of roses for the Grand Inquisitor and those who help him with his task. To take full authority over the masses, to provide for their physical and psychological needs, is a heavy burden. Out of compassion for the many who are weak, the few who are strong feel an obligation to assume the physical and spiritual authority over the weak, a task which calls for sacrifice and self-denial. Hence, it appears that the motivation of the Grand Inquisitor and his staff is highly moral and commendable; it seems to be grounded in the principles of compassion, love, and service.

Thus goes the story. What is its point? For one, it serves to focus certain basic issues in the novel as a whole. To understand the Grand Inquisitor is to understand Ivan Karamazov, and in following through Ivan's story one can also discern Dostoyevsky's own estimate of the Grand Inquisitor's position. These are matters which we cannot pursue here, rewarding as this might be. Our question is whether anything can be learned from the story itself, whether it says something worth knowing about.

I believe that the story does say something important. That it can stand on its own feet is borne out by the fact that it is frequently reprinted by itself, outside of the context of the novel. What does the story say? It captures in dramatic form a predicament which it is very difficult for human beings to avoid and which frequently has dire consequences. There is in all of us something I would call "the Grand-Inquisitor syndrome." It works like this. Suppose a person A judges that person B is in some way deficient, and suppose also that A has some power over B. In a situation like this it is very tempting for A to impose his will on B, and to do so, sincerely believing it is for B's own good.

This case is not exceptional; it is universally present. Whenever it comes to surface more prominently, it shows the features which bothered Dostoyevsky no end and which should bother everyone of us. Here are some examples.

1) A group of men constituting a political party concludes that the existing social order is wrong. Out of sincere conviction that society will be served better by the party's political program, it maneuvers itself into position of power and then suppresses all views, opinions, and practices which are at odds with the views of the party. There is no need to add
here that this characterizes the practices of every totalitarian government.

2) An official of a government chooses to live in an underdeveloped country disregards the opinions and the judgment of the leaders of his country to implement only those projects which copy the political, economic, and social structures of his country.

3) A supporter of racial inequality acts on the assumption that those whose faces do not fit better with their position of inequality because they are either incapable or unprepared to enjoy and be enjoyed. He may even speak in high moral tones of the "white man's burden." 

4) A corporation executive tries to control the lives of his employees, demanding that they not only subscribe to his political views but also that in their personal lives they conform to rigid economic, social, cultural, or even recreational patterns.

If W. H. Whyte's analysis is correct, we might speak of the "organization man's burden," carried by his corporation executives.

5) A husband squelches his wife's aspirations to get educated or to seek more satisfying hobbies, in the belief that his judgment as to what is best for her is obviously superior.

6) A teacher preaches patronizingly and skeptically to a student's sincere effort to offer a constructive criticism of the teacher's views.

Examples could be multiplied indefinitely. Those given vary in scope and significance. Some have global historical repercussions, others affect only individual lives. Yet all mean to us what I have called the Grand-Inquisitor syndrome. When dealing with other persons whose views appear to us wrong or faulty we tend to react in terms of controlling them, believing sincerely that they will benefit by this change. As for John Q. Public's case, good and praiseworthy motives make it easy for us to feel justified in imposing our will on others.

What makes Dostoyevsky's insight great is his genuine sympathy with the Grand Inquisitor, with the person affected by the Grand-Inquisitor syndrome. Dostoyevsky understands how a person may suffer from that kind of presumptuousness and authoritarianism. And as the setting of his story amply illustrates, universality built into this syndrome. It may not be always easy to see, but it is there. The author is in the attempt to secure other people's acquiescence in one's views and values while violating their freedom. Dostoyevsky goes on to show in the novel, especially through the character of Alyosha, the relationship with other human beings can be harmonious and satisfying in the long run only if they themselves can freely agree to respond to us as we see fit, regardless of whether or not they are the same. And as long as they have not performed it, no tyrant or no authoritarian can do it.

These considerations apply to all the examples we considered, Totalitarianism, violence, dictatorship, States, Distract, dishonesty, and revolutions rock the lands where the wayward, the slave, the individualist, and the civil disobedience are chronic where inferiority persists. As W. H. Whyte has shown in his controlled environment of the organization man is one of the great barriers to our progress. We may pay little heed to each other's views and aspirations, marital harmony is not likely to be found. There is little effective learning where teachers ignore the students' minds.

And at this point of trying to pull several rabbits out of one hat, I would immediately agree. That is what I have been trying to do. Not because I believe myself to be a magician, but because I am impressed by the fact-researching relevance which a penetrating insight of a great humanist can have. In his imaginary story Dostoyevsky impinges upon various sorts of problems: psychological, economic, sociological, and political. There are no easy answers to those problems, but no educated person can afford being ignorant about their existence and significance. In some ways they are bound to affect our private or public life, although their exact impact may be difficult to foresee.

We have considered but one "humanitarian" datum which could be interpreted as a sign that there are innumerable others. These are preserved, cherished, and commended. And it would be presumptuous to claim that a university is the only place where such significance can be disclosed and appreciated. But there is also no denying that these phenomena of the human spirit are likely to be given the attention they deserve only in an institution of higher learning. For in our culture it is the scholar who is given time and an obligation to study, to reflect on, and to interpret those documents of human wisdom, and to disseminate them effectively among the young minds. It is strange that in the age of experts, the expertise is not esteemed in matters which vitally affect the course and content of our life. Why should we suppose that just, anyone, alone and unaided, can apply to learn a profession without allowing them sufficient time and adequate opportunity to learn something about their own humanity. For this is what he who is ingenious and able to introduce students to their own humanity. They do so in two ways of this.

1) What we are today is due to the accomplishments of generations gone before. We are the beneficiaries of those who have learned how to explain and to control nature, those who devised patterns of government and of social cooperation, and those who articulated our moral, esthetic, and religious beliefs. Nothing human can be alien to a human being. He has not only the capacity but also the need to enter into the significant experiences of others, living or dead. To be interested in the question "What am I?" is to be interested in what other men have been able to experience, to bring about, to create. A saying, in Mr. Chard's definition, "is simply a human organism that has not received enough new things from the human race." 2) To the extent that one can respond to or to echo the experiences and feelings, talents and accomplishments of other men, one can find out something about the humanity within one's own person. We are all held" to inherit the transmitted heritage of the human race in his own individual life career. The work of the humanist can, therefore, become a guide to the broader and richer will be the front of his own individual exploration.

The word "education" may be also taken in two senses, with some etymological justification in either case. To educate a person may mean to "lead him out" to the world, toward human tradition. But it may also mean to "draw out" of the individual his own potentials, to awaken him to his capacity of appreciating, imitating, and developing the accomplishments of other men. Another appropriate metaphor for "education" is "enlightenment." The aim of education is to bring an individual into the light created by other human beings in some area of experience. He can be led to see what others saw before him, by sharing their perceptions and reflections, to get a more useful image of the nature of education may be obtained by exploiting the etymology of its German equivalent, Bildung. Involves awakening and enlightening, the contact with significant experiences of the human race, by "building" the person by providing him materials for reflection, judgment, decision in his own development. He can be built up to confront, control, or withstand a wider spectrum of experiences than would be available to him from his own original resources.

I wish to conclude by reminding the reader that reflection are not aimed especially at engineers; they are not aimed accordingly at anybody. The humanities can and should play in a university education. An education where humanism will exist, it may teach a trade or a profession, but little else. The fact is that our personal intellectual development affects to our personal and social well-being, is by no means our whole. It may be an unwritten part of the understanding, that on the broad fronts of our existence everyone of us is a latent life historian, and that he may this not be clear to us until after we have pondered Dostoevsky's thought. We can be intelligently, sensitively, and fruitfully we need more than a causally drive-forward way, we proceed thus would be most unscientific. All of us need the wisdom of the human mind, the wisdom painstakingly distilled in the course of human history. Since a humanistic education is a valuable gift for everyone, it follows logically that it is good for engineers as well; there are no reasons why they should be excluded. One frequently hears of an engineer or scientist who is like, in the midst of an outward success, for example, obsessed that the realization that something important was missing from his college education. Find himself still being too meager to be fully satisfying. He does not know how to make use of the knowledge he has to vary the round of his activities. This is not surprising. Freud had discovered in his patient's neuroses because they represented some needs or impulses, quite legitimate that are too suppressed. And so it is essentially, human beings who live and develope much of their potential for self-awareness and self-expression may feel truncated, frustrated, bored, and unhappy. Because of this crucial problem, the problem of education around them has been the loser. And there is no greater loss than this.