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COMMENT

HOW USEFUL SHOULD SCHOOLS BE?

A plan by Geneva's authorities to reduce the importance of philosophy in the secondary school curriculum and to convert this hitherto obligatory discipline into an optional subject has sparked off a prolonged debate in Geneva's educational circles.

The issues involved are far-reaching. In making philosophy an obligatory subject, Swiss schools have abided by a continental tradition of humanism and culture. Secondary school students planning to enter into technical careers were made to follow obligatory courses not necessarily related to their future job. This is also the case of the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich and Lausanne, where students have to register in at least two non-career-directed courses.

Contrary to the British system, where children sometimes have to specialise at eleven and may leave school without an inkling of cultural facts not directly related to their main field of study, continental schools have traditionally aimed at teaching sub-

jects which are not immediately "useful". Philosophy is one of them. It is not useful from a pragmatic point of view. Besides teaching it and writing books, it is difficult to capitalise on such a subject. But the pressures of change were inevitably made to bear on the philosophy courses in schools. Latin has been the first victim of change, now it might be the turn of philosophy.

Many people deplore this trend because they fear that it will lead to a narrowing of vision among the coming generation. It is true that continentals are in the main more educated than Anglo-Saxons. The conversational scope of a middle-class Frenchman is arguably wider than that of his British counterpart, who might share with the other members of his own social class interest in a limited number of topics. But although the Frenchman may be able to quote Kant in a salon, this doesn't make him a more complete man, just as the ability to recognise a Georges Braque painting does not make one a lover of art.

Philosophy is in fact a moral subject. The point of philosophy is to grasp the immensity of knowledge. Its purpose is to develop awareness of life and its problems. Although schools could, and should, teach children how to "live and feel", this is not their present brief, which is rather to churn

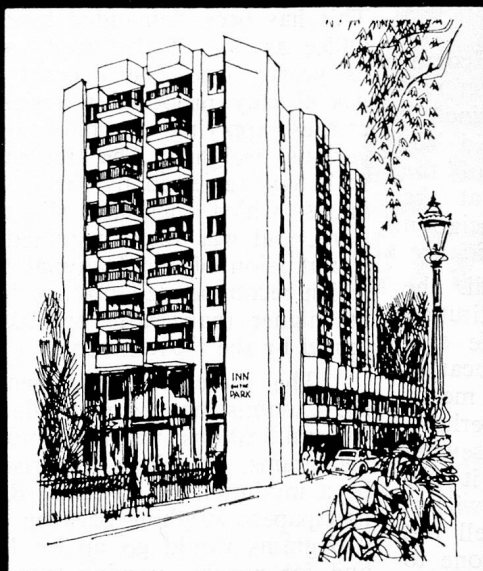
out children adapted to a technological society. Schools exist to train future producers who will ensure the material survival of society. Philosophy is obviously difficult to insert in such a framework and is bound to be degraded to an exam-swotting discipline.

To preserve philosophy in schools without distorting it, it seems necessary to convert the purpose of schools. This is of course what many youngsters have been demanding lately, particularly since 1968. But in the present circumstances, philosophy ought to be taught as an optional subject to those genuinely interested, if its essence is to be preserved.

Philosophy requires a certain maturity. It attracts more people than ever to evening classes and it suffers from no lack of interest. However, rather like "Scripture" and "Divinity", philosophy is a subject that can only be efficiently taught if it is taught in small classes to voluntary and genuinely interested students.

Although the plan to reduce philosophy to a status of a minor subject in the curriculum may involve a break from a continental humanist tradition, it may be better for philosophy.

(PMB)



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