

## Philistines, Dilettantes, and True Believers

*"The worst enemies of any subject are the academic teachers thereof."*

That wry comment of William James is worth taking seriously - that is, it is worth asking oneself if the shoe fits: *Am I an enemy of my subject?*

There are two kinds of academic teachers of the subject of philanthropy these days, those who treat it as education and those who offer it as training.

That's the first mistake. Philanthropy is not reducible to one or the other. Philanthropy is a subject like medicine: it requires training based on education, practice based on theory, action based on reflection. But its existence as a subject is justified not solely by its intellectual interest but by its engagement in good works. Philanthropy is about beneficence, not benevolence.

I'll call those who reduce philanthropy to practice and its study to training *Philistines*. Those who detach the study of philanthropy from its real world reality I will call *Dilettantes*. The Philistines make the subject small and shallow; the Dilettantes make it irrelevant and precious.

Like medicine, philanthropy is a difficult subject to teach. In its better days doctors and nurses are more than technicians, they are "professionals" in the ideal sense: they care about each patient as a person, not simply as a clinical object. They also put their patient's interest before their own. "Service" is a serious element of their code of ethics.

In recent years medicine has become a business, measuring its success by a false bottom line, claiming trust and respect and profits as if the first two really constrained the third. The Philistines have taken over. Medical *education* in such circumstances is medical *training*: non-economic and non-technical values and problems are screened out and discarded. Physicians have often deserved the charge that they assign the moral and personal problems of their patients to the nurses on the case.

The moral risk of philanthropy seen narrowly as training parallels that of medicine. Philanthropy as a business is more interested in measurable results and outcomes, budgets and expenses, staffing and facilities than it is in such fuzzy notions as understanding and compassion. Philanthropy in the hands of the Philistines is often out of touch with the people it serves; Philistines "never have time" to think and reflect. The Philistines also takes it for granted that the services they provide are the services its "customers" want or need.

The Dilettantes ignore practice. No, they are *ignorant* of practice and thus often contemptuous of it. Dilettantes are scornful of fund raising, for example. Dilettantes are self-identified aristocrats obliged to look down on bourgeois grubbing for money.

A second characteristic of Dilettantes is specialization. The word means that every subject must be reduced to its smallest elements -- and left there. Those who try to take abstruse and esoteric subjects to the larger public are dismissed as hucksters. It is someone else's problem to make sense of it all, just as it is someone else's problem to pay for it.

Terminology becomes jargon. "Supererogation" is a word I like, and "desert" is another. Someone coined the useful word "teleopathy," and I coined "philanthropics." Practitioners are equally guilty, of course, adding new definitions to established terms like "development" or creating euphemisms like "advancement."

(Authors of essays like this borrow terms like "Philistine" and *dilettante* from other times and places. Good teachers confess their own sins.)

Universities are places which elevate research and scholarship above teaching undergraduates and service to the community. Teaching graduate students is valued because it is a source of cheap labor. Graduate students can sometimes help in some of the more pedestrian tasks of research, including use of the copier, and even more usefully carry part of the burden of undergraduate teaching. The teachers I most respect are those whose teaching is a calling, a vocation - good words to use in a tract like this. Often their teaching prevents them from pursuing publishable research, but good teachers read a lot. They also read more widely than their better-rewarded research colleagues.

In this context, the new mode of education called "service learning" attempts to bridge the gap between classroom or campus and voluntary association or community. Faculty engaged in service learning are like their medical colleagues who teach and engage in medical practice at the same time. Service learning faculty members are not Dilettantes. They test what they teach against the reality of the world as well as against the findings of research and the claims of theory.

There is perhaps a third category alongside those of Philistine and Dilettante: True Believer. The True Believer in this context is the ideologue wedded to a social or political philosophy that shapes and often distorts philanthropy into something else. Ambiguity and complexity are screened out along with false consciousness or moral sentiment. Secular True Believers see philanthropy as economic or psychological behavior, full stop. Other True Believers see philanthropy as religion - not as a universal religious value but in terms of the doctrine of one religion in particular. True Believers are not only wedded to one point of view; their point of view must prevail over all others.

Are there members of the set of True Believers? Are there members of the sets I've called Philistines and Dilettantes? As a tolerant and forgiving and indulgent type, I tend to find reasons not to force people into such categories. I found William James's two classes he called "tough-minded" and "tender-minded" helpful but I never met anyone who quite fit either category. Perhaps the categories are helpful as a way to bring out the temptations we all feel when we're under pressure or tired. Perhaps they raise some questions worth thinking about.

