

Editorial: *De Finibus*

'We are supposed to take our students from where they are to where they want to be. The trouble is, they don't know where they want to be and we don't know where they are.' This *cri* from a professor in a community college in Arizona was the most penetrating diagnosis to be heard in a recent Danforth Foundation conference on the problems of 'The New Student'. The participants ranged from Presidents of large State Universities to teachers and students from a variety of experimental colleges. The panel of lecturers and seminar leaders included Professors of Higher Education and Apostles of Women's Liberation, as well as practitioners of traditional humanistic scholarship and science in traditional academic institutions. One of this last minority was an English philosopher. Some of his impressions were those of a philosopher and some were those of an Englishman.

An Englishman's first impression is of the scale and variety of the problems. 'New students' include not only the increasing numbers of women and members of ethnic and racial minorities who are being admitted to colleges in the pursuit of equality of opportunity, but also the vast numbers of variously qualified and unqualified students, including some near-illiterates, who seek higher education because it would be unfair to deprive them of any privilege granted to their more gifted contemporaries. The old ways do not suit the new students, and it is easier to change the ways than to change the students. The liberal arts are therefore losing students and resources, while occupational courses flourish, and new interdisciplinary packages are supported by Foundation grants until they are a few years old and thus themselves come under the suspicion of being traditional.

A philosopher's observation is that old confusions about means and ends, however often exposed, are constantly recurring in human thought and practice, especially in times of scarcity and stress. At such a time favours are given to what is useful, and what is useless tries to disguise itself as something else, so that even those who know better give implicit endorsement to the idea that there can be an instrumental value that is not dependent on any intrinsic value. The ancient platitude that knowledge is worth pursuing for its own sake, and that human beings, even when they are new students, have a disinterested curiosity, was repudiated by some as a damnable heresy and embraced by others as itself a new revelation to be embroidered on a banner.

All sides in all the debates agreed at least on the need for programmes, definitions of objectives, the articulation of a 'philosophy' as a prelude to doing anything concrete or particular. But the urgency of the general desire for innovation showed through the abstractness of much of the talk, and at times it might have been pertinent to repeat Eisenhower's injunction to Dulles: 'Don't just do something: stand there!' Still, the energy and vigour of the proceedings were a salutary contrast to the attitude once overpraised by an Anglophile Pittsburgh broker: 'If it's raining outside, you can't mend the roof. If it isn't raining outside, why the hell mend the roof?'