

Perhaps we may illustrate this process of synthesis by the most celebrated historic instance of scientific discovery in conflict with religious belief, the trial of Galileo for insisting that the earth revolved about the sun instead of the sun about the earth. The student might be shown that the Church's conception of the earth as the fixed, immovable center of the universe was formerly the best scientific opinion available and not merely a dictum borrowed from scriptural writings. Upon this conception the Church erected a vast system of symbolic teachings, with each planet having its particular significance and the entire universe whirling around the earth every twenty-four hours, moved by the blessed angels, whom God had created for this especial purpose. Small wonder that many sincere churchmen felt Galileo's theory to be dangerous for the Church. Yet its final acceptance had none of the expected dire consequences. Much of religion's symbolic superstructure lost its meaning, but the deeper idea of an orderly universe manifesting a central controlling intellect had as much validity as before. And this corresponds with the fact that the seeming opposition between the earlier theory of Ptolemy and the later theory of Copernicus and Galileo was not so complete as it appeared. Behind the disagreement as to which heavenly body revolved around the other was a more fundamental perception that the sun and earth had a definite pattern of motion with relation to each other, that this pattern could be accurately determined and used to predict eclipses and similar phenomena. The second theory was a modification rather than a reversal of the first; the first was not so much false as only partially true. Similarly, almost every belief, scientific or otherwise, which has been widely held by the human race, has an element of truth in it and is the foundation stone of later knowledge. Hence the vast importance of a historical perspective in every field of study, for we can understand the present only by knowing the past.

By such illustrations as this, and by other means, the teacher can help the students in the difficult problem of synthesizing their past and present ideas. Needless to say, he should never show contempt for their cherished beliefs, nor should he encourage such a contempt in them. An irritating result of our present emphasis on "independent thinking" is the self-assurance with which so many callow fledglings pass their ignorant verdicts on the accumulated wisdom of the ages. A respect for the opinions of other men, living or dead, does not preclude a refutation of their errors and is more conducive to genuine wisdom than an attitude of assumed superiority.

III

We shall agree, I think, that the attainment of an integrated view of life--what we may call a synthesis--should be a primary aim of the liberal arts college, and that academic studies, however excellently taught, are not complete unless the student gains some perception of their importance in the whole field of knowledge and in his own life. It is therefore well to consider briefly the several divisions of the curriculum from this point of view.