



# The Reduction of the British Mind

*Paul Stiles*

*This is the edited text of a letter written to Dr. Louise Richardson, Principal and Vice-Chancellor of St Andrews University, where Paul spent two years studying. It draws attention to shortcomings in the system characteristic of reductionist thinking and questions the wider purpose of research. Ananda Coomaraswamy famously said that it takes four years to acquire a first rate university education and 40 years to get over it. In a lecture to the Temenos Academy 20 years ago, Kathleen Raine insisted that wisdom should be the goal of all education and 'where the existing universities have increasingly failed, is to relate human studies to any unifying perspective of wisdom.' Little has changed, if Paul's experience is anything to go by.*

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I am writing you to share some thoughts on my experience here at St. Andrews over the past 18 months, in the hope that it might do some good as you try to move the university forward. By way of introduction, I am a postgraduate student in Theology. I am also the author of a book on the nature of the market and its impact on American society: *Is the American Dream Killing You?* By coincidence we have a few things in common, as I am also a graduate of Harvard, where I studied government. My comments have to do with the nature of the educational system here. Since I am a mature student, who has 'been around the block,' perhaps I will be able to share some things that younger students don't see, or are more unwilling to share. Or perhaps you may know all that I am about to say already. I don't know. But I thought it worthwhile to make the effort.

The primary thing I would like to convey is that the system here is plagued and even crippled by reductionism. It is not that pulling things apart is wrong, for it is certainly a powerful tool, it is that putting things together is also a powerful tool, for it is quite naturally the only way we can see things whole. However, the system here does not think holistically at the present moment, and this is a very deeply-rooted problem.

First, let me describe the extent to which I see reductionism permeating the educational system in the UK in general. To be frank, it is not really an educational system, it is a sorting system. The first priority is on grades, not on knowledge. As a result, students are viewed as objects in an assembly line, not individual human subjects. We are here to be quantified with a numerical label. This black-and-white approach is most obviously seen in the anonymity of the system, in which professors do not even know the names of the students who write the papers they grade. This is an idea patently hostile to education—how can anyone track your progress or make tailored comments?—and the most unnerving part about it is how many people accept it as normal. Yet it is profoundly *abnormal*. It subtracts the human element from education, creating antiseptic relationships. Instead of a mutual conversation between teacher and

student sparking creative insight between them, there is a top-down, one-way flow of information, in which the individual nature of the student, his basic *color*, is not considered.

Another by-product of reductionism is the entire system's emphasis on specialization, which even begins before university. Students are expected to define an academic interest at age 15, a requirement completely at odds with the nature of the human being, with our propensity for curiosity, change, adaptation, evolution, for the right and indeed the necessity to expand our minds in new directions. Instead, the populace is shaped into parts of a mechanized system without regard for the whole person and his essential dignity. Interdisciplinary work is frowned on as contrary to refining the parts of the social machine. So it is that most students graduate from Oxford or Cambridge without having read a single work of English literature.

The most devastating effect of reductionism is that it strikes a blow at our ability to think properly. As you read these words your mind is performing a holistic integration, one word after another, creating a rolling concept, a meaning so much greater than the sum of its parts. Reductionism cripples that process, so that the larger whole is lost, and with it, the whole truth. There is no depth to thought, no deep insights into the nature of things, nor the synthesis of the whole, but rather, a superficial focus on accumulating facts. As a result, students are not encouraged to think for themselves, to create new knowledge from what they learn, but to cut and paste facts into papers with an occasional comment, so they can be efficiently graded. The whole process is about error avoidance, rather than intellectual inquiry and creative risk-taking. In the process we lose our ability to think as human beings, and become mere adding machines.

A classic example of this occurred in the pages of the *Times* last year, when the Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company challenged his daughter's low GCSE score in Theatre. He stated that the reason she had achieved such a low score was that he had tutored her himself. In the process he had taught her to think deeply about the nature of theatre, which she had written intelligently about—and been graded down, because the GCSE examiners were looking for the

student to regurgitate facts from the acceptable handbook. In short, the system did not want her to think deeply or creatively, to use her own ideas and imagination, but was merely trying to assess whether she was playing the game well. That is not education. It is the ongoing legacy of the Industrial Revolution, with its sublimation of the human being to linear, mechanical principles. In fact, it is now senseless, as what the economy needs is people who can move around with great flexibility, not people who decided at age 15 to be physicists and have done nothing else since.

Now I have to admit that, ever since coming to St. Andrews, I have encountered the same problem as that woman in the *Times* article. I have been consistently downgraded for *thinking*. And that was the last thing I ever expected. I was never graded down for thinking in the American system. However, I don't want to couch this issue in national terms, as that would be misleading. As the Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company would undoubtedly attest, the ability to think properly is primarily a human right, not a cultural attribute. Furthermore, America suffered not too long ago from this very problem. In the 1950s, America was very much a drill-and-practice environment, and if you have ever seen the architecture of American elementary schools from this period, which look like brick prisons, the philosophy of the buildings were the perfect match for what the system did to the mind of students. America has changed, however, while Britain has not, and as a result, American students consistently underperform in exams and papers here, at least at first. When I first encountered this phenomenon, another American student explained to me: 'It took me a year of bad grades on my papers here before I finally figured out what they wanted. They don't want you to think. They don't want you to take the material anywhere. They just want you to prove what you know. So now I just write a running commentary on the reading, and all my grades have gone up.'

I did not, however, take his advice, primarily because I think it is wrong, and indeed outrageous, to dumb-down the educational process in this fashion. And I have to tell you that I have suffered mightily for it. Now I don't want this to sound like sour grapes, so I must say that prior to coming here I published two books with the two largest publishers in the world, Random House and Harper Collins. *Is the American Dream Killing You?* is endorsed by Harold Bloom, the leading literary critic in the Western World. I say this only to suggest that the rest of the world seems to think that I have an ability to write at a level much higher than the grading system at St. Andrews reflects. Indeed, recently I received a 13 on a paper that I thought was excellent, so I submitted the paper to the editor of a journal for science and medicine, and he asked to publish it! Not surprisingly, *Network Review* has a conscious focus on holism (see April issue this year).

One of the problems in addressing reductionism is that it manifests itself so many ways, some of which are quite subtle, and others less so. What the system wants here is a focus on microscopic detail, that much is obvious. What drives this, however, is fear. There is a fear of being wrong, of taking any form of risk, of opening up one's thought to larger ideas. It is so much safer to choose a topic so small that it reduces the risk of criticism. Meanwhile, the search for universal principles, for deep insight, draws condemnation. Time and again I have been criticized for writing in 'too general' a fashion, rather than praised for reaching a new and insightful conclusion. Most atrociously, the system has lost its faith in the truth. Holism yields a truth, the whole truth, but reductionism goes on *ad infinitum*. So instead of a search for truth, what we have here is a descent into irrelevance, with its associated lack of clarity and use of jargon, a form of thinking that flies in the face of our own intellectual heritage. Here we are, living on the works of Darwin and Einstein, the implication being that we should all try to emulate these greats, while at the same time, forcing

ourselves into a box so narrow that neither relativity nor evolution could have survived it. In short, *we are not thinking*. Since when is the purpose of the Academy to breed a narrow mind? Since when is there more value in defining some microscopic point, than seeing the whole in a new way?

The best example of all this is what I am experiencing at the moment. I came to the University to pursue a longstanding interest in the juncture between religion and science. It is my feeling that visual observation is the link between the two, for it is at once the cornerstone of science, while also being integral to all forms of spirituality. You would not believe the difficulty I have had trying to pursue this new idea here. First I am told that the purpose of an M. Litt thesis is not to say anything new and creative and original, but to show that I can do research. I have tried to explain that a new idea can *also* be justified by research, to no avail. I am told I must comment primarily upon the works of others. Secondly, I am told that no exceptions can be made to this, even though I have personally shown in my last book, with its 300 footnotes, that I have already done significant published research. The assembly line is not going to budge for anyone. Third, I am told that my thesis topic is too broad for an M. Litt dissertation, effectively ruling out any interdisciplinary topic such as mine—even when I have experts in other fields willing to jointly supervise. The barrier to simply writing down a new idea here is absolutely insurmountable.

This leads to the final manifestation of reductionism here at St. Andrews, which is the nature of the organizational system. A reductionist system is by nature bureaucratic. It is inflexible, hierarchical, top-down. This means that it is not disposed to reform itself, but to persist at the expense of any potential reformer. In my view it has become, like so many bureaucracies, self-serving. The longer I am here, the more I realize that the system is not set up for the students. It is not here to educate us, to improve our minds. It is not here to further the highest ideals of education. It is rather set up for the professors, with the students being a necessary evil. While I am sure there are important exceptions, there is, in general, little sense that teachers want to know, engage, or care about, the students, but only deal with us because they have to.

Interestingly, a great and unique book has been published by Yale lately that explains virtually everything that I have just said in psychological terms. It is called *The Master and his Emissary*, and is about the two halves of the brain. The book is the life's work of Iain McGilchrist, a former Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford and practising neuropsychiatrist, and has received rave reviews. Using an extraordinary wealth of research, the first half of the book shows that the left brain is the reductionist side of the brain, and the right brain is the holistic side. The second half then shows that we in the West have moved to an extreme left position, with all kinds of negative repercussions. As Roger Sperry, who won the Nobel Prize for his work on this issue, put it: 'What it comes down to is that modern society discriminates against the right hemisphere of the brain.' The result is a focus on analysis that separates us from truth and leads to a psychological and social dead-end. Moreover, the book explains how it feels for a holistic thinker to participate in a system like this. Basically, it feels like racism. You are continually being downgraded for thinking the way you do, for being yourself, and indeed, for thinking properly. I can think of no more important idea for this university to engage with than the nature and repercussions of reductionism.

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