

## Editorial: Subject and Epithet

Those who coin fashionable new names for unfashionable old foibles have missed an opportunity. Discrimination on grounds of race, age, sex or species is picturesquely condemned by providing each variety with an opprobrious epithet. But we hear no condemnation of *subjectism*, a branch of person's inhumanity to person that is covertly preached and openly practised in schools, colleges and universities, and is not unknown in public life and the public prints.

Subjectists employ all the usual apparatus of discrimination, including subject-jokes. We have all heard of the Russian tourist in Central Park who was told that the man with the spike on the end of a stick was collecting material for a dissertation at Teachers' College. A classical education is ironically praised for enabling its victims to despise the wealth that it prevents them from acquiring. The philosopher looks in a coal cellar at midnight for a black cat that isn't there; the theologian finds it. The pure mathematician is cheap to run because all he needs is a supply of rough paper and a waste paper basket. The philosopher is cheaper still because he doesn't need the waste paper basket.

Pecking orders may be found within subjects as well as between subjects, and between the academic world and the rest of society: '... this great American democracy of ours, in which every plumber can aspire to be a college professor, if he doesn't mind the cut in salary'. Professor Nelson Pike enlarged our understanding of this field by the opening sentences of a course of lectures at Cornell: 'If you are in a company of people of mixed occupations, and somebody asks what you do, and you say you are a college professor, a glazed look comes into his eye. If you are in a company of professors from various departments, and somebody asks what is your field, and you say philosophy, a glazed look comes into his eye. If you are at a conference of philosophers, and somebody asks you what you are working on, and you say philosophy of religion ...'

Sometimes the differences of status are based on actual or supposed variations in the degree of usefulness or practical relevance of different disciplines. Here complications arise from ambivalence about whether to be proud or ashamed of being useful or useless. While the engineer preens himself on the sheer academicism of the training his department offers—a liberal education in itself—the medieval historian or classical scholar promises training for the mind of the administrator or politician. A fuller study of these questions would need to attend to the distinction between hard and soft subjects, and to show how much unmerited contempt arises from confusing it with the distinction between hard and easy subjects. Part of the plausibility of the traditional claim of humane studies to give a

## Editorial

training for life and public life comes from the fact that practical problems commonly have the informality and untidiness that belong more evidently to the questions and answers of historians, critics and philosophers than to those of physicists or mathematicians. A soft subject is one that is easy to do badly and specially difficult to do well. T. S. Eliot's remark about one of the tools of his own trade could be a banner for others who are anxious about their subject status: 'No *vers* is *libre* for the man who wants to do a good job'.