

THE ELEANOR AND ANNA ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

May 16, 1949 (catalog date)

Description: In this segment, ER discusses the recent trend in debating high and middle brow culture and the importance of humility for intellectuals.

Participants: ER

[Break: 00:00-00:06]

[ER:] Thank you, Anna. There's been much talk lately about high brows, low brows, and middle brows, and even, I believe, a magazine article a month or so ago purporting to show which classification you fall into. Supposing that you're in doubt and anxious to know, which is all very well and rather amusing, but probably shouldn't be taken too seriously. This matter of intellectual gradings apparently is taken very seriously, however, by a man from Ridgefield, Connecticut, who writes an indignant letter on the subject to *The New York Herald Tribune*. His letter interested me, and I thought perhaps you too might be interested in what he has to say. He objects strenuously to the way a professor at MIT dismissed the testimony of Mr. [Herbert] Philbrick in the trial of communist leaders going on in New York. Mr. Philbrick, you know, is the FIB [FBI] undercover agent who posed for several years as a member of the communist party. And it seems that the MIT professor characterized Mr. Philbrick as "a person of no intellectual standing." The letter written from Connecticut takes exception to this. "The math professor from MIT," he says, "although undoubtedly very able in his field, displays a lack of humility with this remark. Does he mean," asks the letter writer, "that a person who is an 'intellectual'," an intellectual with quotation marks, that is, "may think and do as he pleases, while a so-called nonintellectual should refrain from expressing himself?" And he goes on to warn that because a person knows specific things about a branch of science like atomic energy, that does not necessarily qualify him to speak with authority on matters such as the Atlantic Pact, for instance. Then he adds, "there's nothing wrong with having a PhD degree, but it does not necessarily make an educated, nor a competent teacher. A professor who preaches scientific rationalism--that is that the advance of science must necessarily mean that faith in god and religion must pass away--is not educated, PhD or nau- or no. Furthermore," he declares, "neither is the man educated who lacks humility in his approach to life or feels himself above the ordinary human being. And," the letter concludes, "there are those of us who believe that an educated man is one who believes and practices the golden rule, has intellectual competence but no arrogance, who realizes that he does not know everything there is to know." (03:15)

I think it's true that the really scientific attitude, the truly intelligent attitude, is one which readily admits that humanity still has a great deal to learn about the world we live in and the men and women in it. It is incredible to realize that during the materialistic era of the close of the last century, many of our leading scientists had just about concluded that we now knew practically everything there was to know. In fact, it was even suggested that the patent offices be closed, for surely everything had already been invented. And this, when we were on the threshold of new discoveries in every branch of science, discoveries which were to revolutionize scientific thought. The attitude so prevalent in those times was a perfect example of the lack of humility of which our letter writer speaks. It's a little like the attitude of the USSR, which considers that there is no improvement possible for anything that goes on under communism. There is a very wise old eastern proverb which says that some people pluck the fruits of the tree of knowledge to crown themselves with instead of plucking them to eat. A degree of wisdom gained from daily living should be within the reach of most of us, even though we cannot all hope to attain the degree of PhD, and I think we might well remember that the fruits of the tree of knowledge are to sustain

and nourish us, not to wear as a decoration upon a high brow. And now back to my daughter, Anna, in Hollywood. (05:06)

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