

A Problem

Kawkab al-Sharq, 21 April 1933

It is a philosophical problem, touching neither politics, nor economics, nor education, nor any of these concerns that occupy people and that they expect the daily newspapers to address for them. It touches none of this, but touches instead a branch of the higher philosophy—metaphysics, or what lies beyond matter, as the philosophers call it. I wish to speak to you of this higher philosophical problem, and I urge you not to be afraid, not to be alarmed, and not to turn away from this discussion for fear of finding in it a difficulty and a hardship you would not wish to find when you read, in the newspapers, the morning talk and the evening talk; you shall find neither hardship nor difficulty. You may, rather, find amusement and diversion, for the Minister of Traditions is the hero of this higher philosophical problem, and the Senate is the school in which this problem was set forth, and the great philosopher attempted to solve it and achieved a success such as neither Plato achieved in the Academy, nor Aristotle in the Lyceum, nor Descartes in his stove-room, nor any of the contemporary philosophers in any school, academy, or portico. All I ask of you is that you grant this problem some of your attention, and a portion of your notice and your leisure; I shall make it easy for you, but you would do well to help me in easing it.

The problem is this: the government wishes to oversee the university. How, then, is this oversight to be exercised? And to whom does this oversight belong? Does it belong to the Ministry of Education? Or does it belong to the Minister of Education? Or, to put it more clearly: does it belong to the Minister of Education in his capacity as Minister of Education? Or does it belong to the Minister of Education in his capacity as the Supreme President of the University?

This is the problem, and I think you will agree with me that it is worthy of care and reflection, worthy of oratory and fine composition, worthy of writing and editorial labour, worthy of dispute and struggle, worthy of endless chatter, worthy of the Senate expending upon it tremendous effort, and worthy of the Minister of Traditions bringing to bear upon it his formidable strength, his marvellous skill, and his eloquence beyond endurance.

And the Senate has indeed fulfilled our hope in it: it turned the problem upside down, and approached it from every angle, expected and unexpected. The Minister of Education spoke on it most admirably, and the assembly dispersed after a lengthy dispute. It is most likely that they did not agree; it is most likely that some of them did not understand others; and it is most likely that the responsibility for this problem falls upon our eminent teacher Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid Bey, for it was he who first raised this problem while a certain university statute was being drafted, claiming that the Minister of Education holds two capacities: in one, he oversees the Ministry of Education; in the other, he oversees the University.

The university men understood this remark from their Director, for they possess some acquaintance with philosophy—perhaps slight, but sufficient at times to let them grasp it. But once this remark travelled from the University to the Ministry, and thence to the two Houses of Parliament, the Ministry found it tiresome, the Chamber of Deputies dismissed it, and the Senate attempted to understand it.

As for the Minister of Education, he found this problem a fertile one: it allowed him to talk, and he loves to talk; it allowed him to philosophise, and he is enamoured of philosophy; it allowed him to orate, and he is passionately devoted to oratory; and it made of him a problem of philosophy in its own right, a conundrum of metaphysics and what lies beyond matter. So he accepted the problem, and embraced it, and clasped it between his arms, until it merged with him and he merged with it, and he became the problem, and the problem became the Minister of Education—until the Senators found themselves unable to tell whether they were discussing the Minister-problem, or the problem-Minister!

And the Minister of Traditions labours to explain himself to the Senate, saying it and saying it again, going on and on, repeating to the honourable Senators that he holds two capacities: he is Minister of Education, and he is President of the University. One member answers him: "But you are Minister of Education in either case." The Minister says: "Yes, but I hold two capacities—I am Minister of Education, and I am President of the University." Another member says: "But you are Minister of Education precisely when you are President of the University." The Minister answers: "Yes, but I hold two capacities—I am Minister of Education, and I am President of the University."

And the Minister goes round and round, and the Senators go round with him, until everyone is seized by a fearsome dizziness, and one of the Senators cries out: "I have no idea what concern the Minister of Education has with these husks!"

And in truth, this whole matter has been mere husks ever since it left the University and reached the Ministry and the Parliament. For the first idea underlying this problem was that there should be no connection whatsoever between the University and the offices of the Ministry of Education, and that the connection should instead be between the University and the person of the Minister.

It once occurred to the University, in a day of its glory, to set aside an office for the Minister within its own premises, so that the University's affairs need never travel to the Ministry's bureau. This idea, as you see, was a practical one, resting upon an actual fact: namely, that the Ministry of Education is too incompetent to understand university matters, and too narrow of mind to conduct them, and that the connection between it and the University must therefore be severed. But since the University is one of the institutes of the state, and must necessarily be overseen by Parliament, and since the ministers are Parliament's instrument for overseeing the affairs and interests of the state, the Minister of Education was made the University's Supreme President, speaking on its behalf in the Council of Ministers, and speaking on its behalf in the two Houses of Parliament.

This was the first idea, and it is, as you see, simple, straightforward, free of complication and difficulty. But no sooner had it travelled beyond the University than non-university men proved unable to understand it, so they let go of its meaning and clung to its wording instead. And the Minister of Traditions saw in this idea a glory and a pride that distinguished him from his fellow ministers, and brought him nearer to the Prime Minister—for he alone held two capacities, while every other minister held but one! He alone had two tongues, while every other minister had but one! And the Prime Minister alone resembled him in this, in that he too held two capacities, being both a minister and the head of a ministry!

For this reason, the Minister of Traditions clung to this university idea in outward appearance, without ever putting it into practice in actual fact. And there is no clearer proof of this than that the Senate's minutes state plainly that the one who undertook the defence of the

university statutes before the Education Committee was no university man at all: he was not the University's Director in his own right, for the University has no Director at the moment; nor its acting Director, for the acting Director of the University was, in all likelihood, too occupied to bother with this absurdity; nor its Secretary-General, for the Secretary-General was in Toshka, or in Hurghada, visiting the University's excavations in Upper Egypt, or the marine biology station on the Red Sea coast, or inspecting the work of university professors here and there.

Rather, the one who undertook the defence of the university statutes was the Secretary-General of the Ministry of Education, a man with no connection whatsoever to the University, nor any reason to have one, since he serves the Minister in only one of his two capacities, not in both of them together.

The Minister of Education, then, holds two capacities in name, but in actual fact holds only one: that of a member of the Council of Ministers—that is, Minister of Education.

You may well think I have gone on too long about this matter, but I am excused for this lengthiness, for the Senate went on at length, and the Minister of Education went on at length over this problem, and both of them furnished proof, for the thousand-and-second time, that in Egypt there are matters of wording and appearance more abundant than anything else.

For the Senate, having followed the Chamber of Deputies, approved two of the university statutes without difficulty or effort, save over matters of wording. And yet some Senators took a stand deserving of fair recognition, when they refused to allow the Minister of Education to transfer members of the teaching staff without regard to the opinion of the University Council. The man in question spoke at great length and pressed his point, pursuing various lines of argument, each of some value; but the matter had already been decided, and he found only two or three fellow Senators to support his stand, and the Minister of Education achieved the domination he sought.

And so the University Council's opinion became merely advisory in the matter of transferring university men, on the grounds that this Council—composed of twenty members, two of them Under-Secretaries of ministries, five appointed by the government, four deans of faculties, four of their deputies, and four chair-holding professors of the faculties—this

entire Council cannot possibly be entrusted with the University's own interests, and so the Minister must oversee it!

This entire Council cannot possibly be trusted to be free of favouritism toward university men, so the Minister must oversee it! This entire Council is a minor, in need of guardianship, so the Minister must oversee it!

And it is not I who say these words; they are words spoken in their entirety in the Senate, recorded in their entirety in the Senate's minutes, heard in their entirety by the University's acting Director and the Dean of the Faculty of Law, approved in their entirety by the Senate, and soon to be accepted in their entirety by university men, whether willingly or reluctantly—just as they have already been accepted in their entirety by the University's acting Director, His Excellency Dr Ali Pasha Ibrahim!

University men, to whom Egypt entrusts her higher education—that is, the task of carrying young men from the stage of youth into the stage of manhood and the bearing of responsibility—ought to be congratulated, when the Senate rules that they are prone to favouritism, and thus in need of supervision, and that they are feeble minors, and thus in need of guardianship. And what guardianship? The guardianship of one single man: the Minister of Education!

Among them are professors of medicine, professors of law, professors of literature, professors of science, and non-academic officials besides; and every one of them is presumed to be experienced, having profited from experience, and every one of them is presumed to be of good character, contented in soul, clean of conscience, honourable in conduct. And yet, for all this—indeed, precisely because of all this—they are prone to favouritism, and so must be supervised! And for all this, they are minors, and so a guardian must be set over them—and this guardian is a minister, who may be learned or may be ignorant, who may be intelligent or may be dull-witted, who may be upright in conduct or may be crooked in life, since it is nothing but the accidents of political circumstance that place him in the minister's chair.

For the state has not yet drafted a law, like the University law, setting forth the conditions that must be met by anyone who holds the office of minister, as it has set forth the conditions that must be met by anyone who holds the office of professor. And the Minister of Education knows full well that he has managed to become a minister, but could not become a professor at the University, were the University law applied as

it ought to be. And yet the Minister of Education, who cannot be a professor at the University, is guardian over university men, and university men accept this guardianship, and two of their own deans smile upon it in the Senate! How powerful is the effect of high office upon the soul!

More splendid still: the Minister of Education wished to defend the government's encroachment upon the University by citing what happens in Europe, and the Senate failed to notice that the proof he cited was not for the Minister at all, but against him.

The Minister claimed that French law does not permit the transfer of any member of a university teaching staff except after taking the Minister's opinion. If this is indeed true, then it is precisely what is wanted for our own university, for there the Minister's opinion is merely advisory, not decisive, and the decisive opinion belongs to the university, not the minister. But among us, Parliament has granted the Minister the right to transfer staff after merely taking the opinion of the University Council, thus making the University's opinion advisory and the Minister's opinion decisive—precisely the opposite of what actually obtains in France.

It is most likely that the Council failed to notice this entanglement into which the Minister of Education had forced himself, through his two problematic capacities! And thus was accomplished, for the Minister of Education, the erasure of the University's independence, even in those of its affairs most closely bound up with its internal life; for every member of the University's teaching staff is subject to the authority of the Minister, or to the authority of those who direct the Minister. It is enough for the Minister to grow angry, or for those who control the Minister to grow angry, for a professor to be transferred out of the University to wherever the government wishes him sent. The University may dare to speak out and refuse, but the Minister is fully capable of paying no heed whatsoever to what the University says.

More splendid and more admirable than all of this: the Minister of Education wished to defend this authority of his with logic, since he is a philosopher, and so entangled himself in an absurdity the Senate again failed to notice.

The Minister claimed that some professors might be accused of inciting strikes, and the accusation proven against them, or might be accused of spreading dangerous opinions, and the accusation proven

against them—and therefore, he argued, the Minister must be left the right to transfer them! But why, then, was a Disciplinary Council established at all, if it is not to be entrusted with the trial of those who incite strikes or corrupt the opinions of the young?

We must understand from this that there will now exist, within the University, a Disciplinary Council to which clear and evident matters are referred—matters on which one may say simply yes or no, and for which proof may be established—and another authority besides, the authority of the Minister, which rules upon matters for which no proof can be established, but which are pursued instead through informers and spies. And should the Minister be questioned about this, he arms himself with one of his two capacities, and with the fact that he is answerable before Parliament, before the nation, and before his conscience!

And university men accept this and are content with it, and their acting Director smiles at it before the Senate! How very much the soul can bear of injustice, that it might still manage to earn its daily bread!