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"What have I Done?":
An Interview with Dr. Arthur DuPre'  
By Sanford H. Jaffe

"The question 'What have I done?' is one that we may well ask ourselves, as we read each day, of fresh atrocities in Vietnam---as we create, or mouth or tolerate the deceptions that will be used to justify the next defense of freedom."

The following is a transcribed tape interview, conducted two weeks ago, with Arthur DuPre'. Dr. DuPre' has been an instructor of mathematics at MSU since September, prior to his position here he had taught two years at Berkley. He has recently come under administration attack for what has been termed his "liberal" grading procedure and his "non-objective" teaching methods.

The taped interview with Dr. DuPre' lasted over four hours, making it necessary to edit and collect the three most relevant topics in order to maintain some degree of cohesion as to subject matter. It is important for the reader to bear in mind the collage nature of the presentation of this interview.

A Question of Integrity

"Dr. Maneri (Chairman of the Math Department) was very upset about my having given so many A's last quarter; we went over to Dean Conley's, and it just so happened that the Dean had given all A's to his chemistry class. I asked about this and Dr. Maneri said he knew Dean Conley and that he respected his integrity, which was an obvious reflection upon me... Because of our philosophical differences the chairman of the department thought it wise that I not teach a history of mathematics course to prospective high school teachers, because he wanted to shield them from my ideas. Later he wanted to retract this... He didn't want me to say in public that he had said that he wanted to shield them from my ideas, but something once said is said. This was a course that I was tentatively scheduled to teach and the reason given for my not teaching it was that I did not have an objective enough viewpoint about mathematics. Objectivity obviously means agreeing with the chairman. I probably would have taught here for another year if I had not been coerced into resigning, which I was... It has progressed to the point where yesterday the chairman asked me what I would be doing next year and I said I thought I would possibly be going to England. He smiled and laughed his little laugh, and said 'You may be going sooner than that.'"

The Grading System

Grades are used by several sources, the selective service uses grades for obvious purposes, because they don't have enough time to interview people personally and find out their capabilities, either by giving them direct testing or otherwise. The easiest thing to do is look at some sort of profile, which includes grades. Most of the good universities, good in the traditional sense, Yale, Harvard, are moving away from the grading system because they realize grades are arbitrary. They depend not only on the professor but on the particular metabolism of the student at the time of taking the test, especially an in-class test. Any sort of grading system is arbitrary. I think the grading system is most likely to be dropped sooner in the social sciences than in the mathematics and related sciences. At Wright State I find that it is much easier to give high grades to seniors and juniors than it is to freshmen and sophomores, for the obvious reason that the university in giving low grades to freshmen weed some of them out and hence attempts to increase some of its prestige. The one thing
that I find disturbing, to say the least, is that I am in a bind here because of my grading procedure... it just does not fall into a proper pattern. I'm in a difficult position here because of my grading profile, whereas at another university it would not even come into question; it wouldn't be a matter of contention because it wouldn't exist. The most disturbing thing I heard yesterday, which is hearsay, but which I would still like to make public, is that a person is being considered by this department for a teaching position next year who was fired from his previous position for giving grades that were to low. So... from one extreme to another...you've got to think that what you're doing has no relation to outside reality, otherwise one can't give A's, B's, C's, D's, and F's, knowing that these are going to used by someone else for purposes of which you may not agree. They are (instructors) not forced to give these grades and they're only hiding behind the cloak of professionalism if they say they have to give these grades, because no one makes them give these grades. That's something that I've been trying to prove; that you don't have to give certain grades...that you aren't obligated to give certain grades...that the responsibility of giving certain grades lies with the professor giving those grades. The chairman has claimed that I'm not grading the students individually. And I pointed out to him that as always a grade given a student is never completely individual if he has talked to anyone else. That the degree of individuality of the grading system is very much a function of collaboration with other students...they're believing in categories that have been created by others; these categories have no existence in reality; these are artificial categories and I don't subscribe to the existence of these categories. That's why I have my own profile of grading. I don't subscribe to these categories; I don't believe there is such a thing as an A student or a B student or a C student or a D student or an F student. I don't believe in a linear arrangement of students. I don't believe that abilities can be ordered... I've been told that best when I hear him speak at Antioch. He said that "A company looking at someone's report card sees all A's and he says ah, fine let's hire him; then he looks at someone else's card, all D's, and he says hmm let's not hire him he may take over the company." And that's exactly what it means, because if you don't get good grades it means that you have not conformed to the system; that you're not studying what you've been told to study; that you're not learning what you've been told to learn. He'll come to class and he'll absorb and I would hate to think a student learned more because I was threatening him with an F, D, C, B, A system. I would prefer no grades at all, not even pass-fail... I think even pass-fail is sort of a cop out. You can give higher grades to upper classman because it's done everywhere... but at a state university like this, where everyone is accepted...so you've got to weed these freshmen out. This is the prevailing thinking...because they're stupid...I've been told this...I've been told that freshmen are stupid...they don't quite have what it takes. I didn't find this out at all...I found that since they are first year college students that their minds are less dominated...that they are open minded...they're fresher, they're more interesting.

I think VSU bears a very close resemblance to an Air Force Academy or a Military Academy. It appears to be run that way, especially by the faculty I have come into contact with. Except for a difference of uniform I may as well be working for military commanders. Reasons are not used; orders are given... and expected to be followed. A few reasons are given, but these are usually vague and perfunctory. It appears that the main concern of the faculty at this university are grades. The content of the course is secondary and even that content is not supposed to vary too much from set standards. I've been told and can only believe that the lower courses are service courses, that is, courses that are to prepare the
students for other courses. Any sort of contact between the students and the world outside or the student and reality or the student and the motivations of the faculty members are really beside the point. In other words, the faculty member is not really encouraged to bring the course into perspective; just to teach the material and that's it. He's expected to stick to the subject; in this I think Wright State is very military and I would not encourage any professor to teach at SU. I don't see how anyone who has any self-respect could teach at this university. Further, I don't think the people in a position of authority here are acting in a responsible manner. Hence, I do not respect their authority for that reason. I don't think they're acting responsibly to their "inferiors" or to their "superiors" - the board of regents and the people of the state of Ohio. The type of classroom instruction that is encouraged here would be the first, I think, to be replaced by computer instruction. Having achieved success in that I assigned a final examination which was a take home examination, eliciting from the students some measure of originality. Having done this and having had great success in this, the chairman, of course, not even having read the examination reacted the way one would normally react; "Well, that's fine. The next quarter you should use multiple choice examinations." It appears logical doesn't it, and that's the sort of logic that's prevailing the halls here.

My motivation for the recording and publication of the preceding interview is both to inform and to fulfill my self-determined obligation; an obligation of conscience to support a faculty member who is still aware that his essential responsibility is to the student; an obligation to faculty who have not forgotten that they too were once students and mindful that they, even as faculty are still niggers; an obligation to any instructor who in a meaningful manner asserts his dissent at the systematic degradation of student into nigger; and specifically to Arthur DuPre and instructors like him who, having asked themselves Chomsky's question -- "What have I done," exercise their dissent in a responsible, meaningful, and relevant manner and because of this are intimidated, coerced, and "mindful of Mr. Staub and Mr. Mills are, in the "final solution," ejected. Thus, it becomes an imperative of my obligation that I manifest my "defense of freedom" in at least this minimal way.

It is becoming increasingly obvious that central to a student-faculty-administration relationship that a redefining of rights and responsibilities is necessary; that a basic assumption must be made that this university was not created out of an anti-poverty program to accommodate jobs for unemployed administrators and faculty; that it is the responsibility of the administration and faculty to service the needs of the student and not to decide those needs; that if this university was created for the student the student has the responsibility to demand his right to determine his own needs and the responsibility to demand that those needs be met for if this university was not created for the students then the perpetrators of this "redefinition" are justifying their own destruction. Each student must answer the question "will I use SU to fulfill his own needs or will I allow SU to use him for whatever needs they see fit." For there can be no neutrals.