

**NEITHER REWARD
NOR PUNISHMENT**

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*In nature there are neither rewards nor
punishments – there are consequences.*

*R. G. Ingersoll, Lectures and Essays, 3rd
Series.*

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He knocked on the door. Two dull raps with the flat of his knuckles. He waited. The door was pulled open wide and the head, still holding the handle, waved him in with a sweep of his arm.

Unwin. Come in. Come in. Sit down. Sit down.

The head moved round to the far side of the broad desk and allowed himself to fall into his chair. The sleeves of his gown fell

more slowly. The single sheet of paper on the dark polished surface drifted a little in the swirl of air. He swivelled slightly to his right and raised one knee over the other and interlaced his fingers across the waistcoat of his suit and leaned back as far as the chair would let him.

Well, Unwin. Mathematics of course.

Yes, sir.

As I said to you all, the purpose of these little sessions is to give you some idea of what it will be like to be interviewed for a university place.

Dennis nodded.

Now there's no general pattern. Could be one interviewer or two. They may not ask any questions about your subject. But then they might. They'll be hoping you will talk. The more you talk the less time they will have to ask questions. Keeping his lips together he smiled.

Dennis waited.

But that doesn't mean you should talk for the sake of talking. They will want to find out about you. His forefingers unlinked themselves and made a V, tips forced together. Who you are. The V pointed towards him. What you are. The fingers moved up and down. How you think. The fingers parted. Have you got what it takes. The fingers came together and he brought them up to his face, below his bottom lip. They don't want to take on anyone who needs nursemaiding. Use each question as an opportunity to let them know more about yourself. He hunched his chair forward a few inches and reached for the sheet of paper. He looked at it for a second or two.

Sports? No rugby? No cricket? Anything?

No, sir.

The head nodded. Hobbies?

Not really.

What do you do? In your leisure time.

I read.

What do you read?

Books.

Of course. Of course. Books. But which books?

He shuffled and sat more upright. Anything.

Anything? You've no particular enthusiasms or favourite authors?

Dennis frowned. No. I read books because they have been written. Not because of what they are about or who has written them.

After you have read a book do you always think it was worth reading.

Yes.

All of them?

Yes. If someone thought it was worth writing then it must be worth reading.

Surely there are some books that make you ask why it was written?

Yes. Often.

And is there often an answer?

He looked at his own hands, palms flat together, fingers gripped between his thighs. I try to imagine the person it was written for. I try to understand the relationship between the writer and the reader. I try and understand them as people. I want to understand people.

Are the books you read predominantly novels?

No. I read non-fiction. He raised his head. Mostly non-fiction. Beyond the high shallow window in the wall behind the head, snow was falling. Floating flakes adhered to the glass and softened and slid.

But aren't such books written to inform, to educate, to enlighten? To tell you about an area of human achievement. To explain the coherence of an area of knowledge?

Yes. He flashed a quick glance at the headmaster's face. They do. Snow was accumulating in a corner of the window. But they also tell you about people. The flakes were more numerous.

You mean biography?

No, all books. A mathematics textbook tells you about people.

But you learn more about people from novels? How they behave. React. Think.

The accumulation of snow was extending up the side of the window and along the lower edge of the window. The line bounding the snow curved sharply near the corner and was almost straight at its extremes.

Unwin?

Yes, sir?

So?

It's rather like one arm of a rectangular hyperbola.

What is?

The snow. The snow on the window.

The head stared over his shoulder.

How would you determine the equation of the curve.

The headmaster slowly elevated one hip. Ah. He extracted, at length, a white handkerchief. Mathematics. He lowered the hip and silently wiped his nose, keeping his gaze on Dennis's face.

Yes. Dennis rotated his face as he continued to study the window. But where would you start? He glanced at his teacher. What assumptions? What parameters?

The head picked up the sheet of paper again. He spent a few seconds reading. His eyes did not follow any of the lines of writing. He put down the sheet. What is a number?

Sir?

What is a number?

I'm not sure what.

Come on boy, don't dither. What is a number? You mathematicians deal with them every day.

The ceiling was white. A double fluorescent tube was mounted parallel to the long uniformly pale walls. Well there are different kinds of numbers.

Yes.

A black-and-white photograph of a team of men arranged in rows hung on the wall to his left. The most basic. He stopped.