

The Public University and the Common Good

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When Jacques Maritain focuses on education, he reminds those of us in the university of our wider obligations to our society. Like centrifugal forces, tremendous revolutions in our times are pulling apart the most elemental fabric binding together our society, which is a shared sense of the common good. These centrifugal forces in the various realms of human interaction, whether they be political, economic, ethnic, religious or cultural, increasingly threaten any shared value system that might supersede individual interests. To suggest the most obvious examples, we see this in the conflicts between liberal and conservative, rich and poor, the majority race and the minority races. These tensions have persisted in this country from the beginning.

Today the debate has changed. The question no longer seems, Can we agree on how to pursue the common good? Now it seems to be, Is there a common good? But are there not ideals, ethical purposes, and values that are intrinsic to a good society? If so, can we agree on how to define the common good that will lead toward this type of society? From the perspective of those of us in the university, the question is, Can the university help define and shape the common good and contribute to building a good society? If certain conflicts are *centrifugal* forces pulling at the fabric of our society, perhaps the public university can help provide a counteracting *centripetal* force by its earnest attention to the civic and ethical responsibilities this question implies.

What I want to reflect upon today is Maritain's relevance to these questions I have mentioned, especially in regard to an institution at the pinnacle of our educational system, the public university. The public university should be a crossroad of the intellect. It provides a concentration of sophisticated thinkers from many disciplines. It is trusted with academic freedom

20 JOHN M. PALMS

so that it can provide a forum for the free exploration of ideas. It provides a public square that brings together the knowledge and wisdom of the elders and the idealism and energy of the young. It provides a setting in which understanding and truth can be pursued with civility, reason, deliberateness, and broad, even holistic, rational perspectives, in a manner that is not dogmatic or doctrinaire.

We do still believe in the pursuit of truth in the university—which is to say we also believe that truth can be obtained. Further, we believe we best pursue truth through the combined contributions of the many types of thought and analysis available—from anthropology to zoology, from English to engineering, from theology to biology, from physics to philosophy.

In *Education at the Crossroads*, Maritain alludes to the holistic conception of the human intellect and imagination that prompts the university's various intellectual endeavors. As he writes: "Due to the very fact that he is endowed with a knowing power which is unlimited and which nonetheless only advances step by step, man cannot progress in his own specific life, both intellectually and morally, without being helped by collective experience previously accumulated and preserved, and by a regular transmission of acquired knowledge."¹

We should be particularly mindful of Maritain's phrase, "a knowing power . . . which . . . advances step by step." With this phrase, he suggests why the university can both seek understanding and truth and yet avoid dogmatism. In indicating the gradual movement of our knowing, this phrase affirms how the university can be both confident in its knowledge and yet humble before the limited light that this knowledge casts on ultimate questions. But though the questions remain, the understanding grows. The understanding grows because of the careful application of reason.

The surety of this understanding increases further because the university's methods, facts, and ideas receive constant scrutiny in and out of the academy. We remember Thomas Jefferson's powerful observation: "[T]ruth is great and will prevail if left to itself; that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate, errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them."²

¹ Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1943), p. 2.

² Julian P. Boyd, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), p. 303.

Tempering its knowledge with skepticism—but with a skepticism that does not degrade into cynicism—the university maintains its integrity as it proposes what is sound and wise. This balance between the continued search for truth and legitimate skepticism about what it teaches and discovers gives the university the credibility and moral authority that allow it to presume, as has been said, “to set the standards of truth for a society, to stipulate the rules that distinguish good sense from nonsense, truth from error, excellence from mediocrity . . . [and] . . . to attempt to *shape* thought and conscience.”³ I write this essay as someone new to the philosophy of Jacques Maritain. But reading *Education at the Crossroads*, I was struck most of all by his holistic view of learning to which I alluded a moment ago. I believe it is a view consistent with the holistic responsibilities of the university. His title is in fact wonderfully resonant with meaning for the role of the university in our culture. He sees the human being as a crossroad of two forces: materialistic desires—the physical desires, the expressions of our incarnate condition and of our individuality—and something deeper, more profound, if unquantifiable—the human spirit, or personality for Maritain, grounded in the “*act of existence*.”

Most importantly for the role of the university, Maritain says that we possess this dual nature not alone but in relation to wider societal responsibilities. He writes, “[O]ne does not make a man except in the bosom of the social ties where there is an awakening of civic understanding and civic virtues.”⁴

With such ideas, Maritain reminds us of a critical question before higher education: Is our sole mission with our students making them technically skilled graduates? Or should we also strive to bring issues of mutual respect, character, virtue, civic obligation, conscience, and the common good once again into their educational experiences?

These questions have their own crossroad in the history and ideas of the public university. The idea that education has a vital civic role has been central to the public university in America since the first ones were founded.

The University of South Carolina is one of these universities. It enjoys the distinction of being the first public university to be fully funded by its state. In 1801, the South Carolina General Assembly created South Carolina College, as it was then known. The state fully allocated for its needs

³ Charles W. Anderson, *Prescribing the Life of the Mind* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), p. ix.

⁴ Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, p. 19.

22 JOHN M. PALMS

with \$50,000, a great sum back then. During this same time, three other public universities were created: the University of Georgia, the University of North Carolina, and the University of Virginia. They were given varying sums of public money and expected to raise the rest from private sources.

Whether fully or partially funded by their states, all four of these universities were expected to perform the civic role that Maritain asked of the educational system some 150 years later—and which is still needed and expected of the public university today. Further, while Maritain's ideas reflect his own religious convictions, they also describe a role of public universities that were not founded for religious purposes. In fact, the religious fervor that swept the South in the antebellum period and which still affects today's South did not arrive until after these universities were created. In 1800, only ten percent of white Southerners belonged to a church.⁵

When the citizens founded these universities, then, they made the investment and the commitment for civic rather than sectarian reasons. These institutions were seen not merely as *intellectual* crossroads, but also as *civic* crossroads. They were seen as crossroads in which the next generation of leaders would learn together how to bring the newly created American republic safely out of the tensions and burdens of independence. They were seen as *civic* crossroads in which the next generation of leaders could share together the experience of higher learning based upon principles of citizenship and civic responsibility. That is, they were crossroads of education where people could together seek, define, and advance the common good.

Consider the University of South Carolina. The Preamble to an Act to Establish South Carolina College calls upon the institution "to promote the instruction, the good order and the harmony of the entire community," the entire state. Its motto, established at USC's beginning, is one of the great mottos in higher education. It is taken from a poem by Ovid in which he appeals to the noblest nature of a young, well-educated king. The Latin that appears on the University's official seal reads, "*Emollit Mores Nec Sinit Esse Feros.*"

Translated, this motto says, "Learning humanizes character and does not permit it to be cruel." Not practical purposes, but higher moral obligations bind us one to another and should serve as the University's guiding hand.

Similar ideals helped found the University of Georgia. The words of one early patron emphasize the presumption of a common good that this public

⁵ William J. Cooper, Jr. and Thomas E. Terrill, *The American South: A History* (New York: Knopf, 1990), p. 263.

university was expected to foster, "As it is the distinguishing happiness of free government that civil order should be the result of choice and not necessity, and the common wishes of the people become the law of the land, their public prosperity and even existence very much depends upon suitably forming the minds and the morals of their citizens."⁶

The University of North Carolina was also called upon to promote virtues that would advance the common good. It was created in part to help form "citizens capable of comprehending, improving and defending the principles of government; citizens who, from the highest impulse and a just sense of their own and the general happiness, would be induced to practice the duties of social morality."⁷

Finally, we know that a sense of the common good was the very reason Thomas Jefferson worked to create the University of Virginia. He believed that well-educated citizens would provide ultimate security for the flourishing of true democracy—that the quality of their educated judgment and the society's common good were bound together.

How archaic, how anachronistic do such ideals of virtue and the common good sound today! Yet these idealistic missions were part of the reason, if not the primary reason, that the public university in America found public support and came into existence. Such missions may even help explain why people then were comfortable supporting public universities with their tax dollars. These universities were expected not simply to "skill" their students, but also to advance noble qualities in them, qualities which were seen as being intrinsically valuable, as well as essential to the common good. This meant, of course, that there *actually* was a sense of higher values and the common good, that everything was not of equal merit. Best practices and principles could be discerned from among competing ideologies and interests.

These founders would have agreed with an opinion expressed by Charles Anderson in his excellent book about the contemporary university entitled *Prescribing the Life of the Mind*: "If we were to insist that all we could say in the end was that there were many diverse points of view and that we had no way of telling the better from the worse, the general opinion would be

⁶ Abraham Baldwin as quoted in E. Merton Coulter, *A Short History of Georgia* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1933), p. 267.

⁷ Hugh T. Lefler and Louis R. Wilson, eds., *A Documentary History of the University of North Carolina: 1776–1799*, vol. 2 (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1953), p. 35.

that we might as well close our doors and disband. In the public mind, we are *expected* to seek the truth and to teach our best approximations of it.”⁸

We know that today it is hardly implicitly trusted that universities contribute to the examination, definition, and advancement of a common good. Individual families support the educational costs of their children. Taxes provide a portion of the university’s expenses. State and federal funds contribute to the development of particular programs or research. But is there a *communal* sense that providing higher learning is something worthy of broad public investment? Is there a sense that the *society as a whole* should support public higher education? Instead, we face a cynicism about the public university’s mission and performance that helps explain why state funding has decreased so much.

None of the four public universities I have named get even fifty percent of their budget from the state. The University of Virginia gets 14 percent. My own university gets just 38 percent of its budget from direct state appropriations. I suspect those of you from public universities can cite a similar problem.

Of course, a variety of national and state economic factors have helped reduce state financial support. But don’t people also seem to feel that universities aren’t contributing anymore to the common good—or that universities are in fact a cause for cultural demise? Isn’t there a perception that the principal benefactor of our excellent public higher education system is the one getting the degree, not the community? Isn’t it true that the people don’t see our graduates developing qualities that will encourage them to postpone their self-aggrandizement and to consider the larger needs of their society, their communities, and their families?

Ironically, universities themselves share responsibility for this cynicism to which we are subject. We have gone too far toward a concept of education that justifies itself based only upon practical performance in the areas that can be measured. We brag about our students’ SAT scores, the number of graduates we produce, how many get jobs, their starting salaries, the dollar amounts of research we do, the contributions we make to economic development. We love to quantify things. We know how our students hate essay tests and papers where we make subjective judgments. Tenure and promotion decisions reflect the same aversions. We want to know how many articles our colleagues publish, how many students they teach, how many graduate students they advise, how many research dollars they attract.

⁸ Anderson, *Prescribing the Life of the Mind*, p. xi.

These are all viable and valuable aspects of evaluating universities. But do we *only* want to evaluate a university or a person by what can be measured? In Raphael's famous painting, "The School of Athens," Aristotle and Plato walk side by side. Plato points to the sky, Aristotle to the earth. They are debating two different philosophies of education: Plato's idealism, his sense of ultimate forms, and Aristotle's realism, his sense of particular, substantial forms. Don't both views of reality belong in the modern university, that place where we apply our minds in best practice to the fullness of human experience? After the Industrial Revolution, we changed our universities based upon the German model. In the hundred years since then, we seem to have forgotten that a broader civic and ethical role—*beyond* what could be measured—helped produce the public university in the first place.

For Maritain, this problem belongs to a wider symptom of a moral illness affecting humanity. As Joseph Pappin, Dean of the University of South Carolina's Lancaster campus, has put it: "Maritain's assessment of the human condition . . . hinges upon the false deification of man, a secularized world view, an exaltation of the autonomy of the individual will, a narrowing of reason to the quantifiable and the rise of the nominalistic perspective, a reversion to primitive instincts and experience as a realm of authentic human experience."⁹

This passage indicates that Maritain recognized the positivist view that contributes to the public university's current problems. This passage also indicates that Maritain saw a wider societal and ontological dilemma. In terms of the university, this crisis that Maritain diagnoses is revealed in society's cynicism about the university's role in matters of civic virtue, responsibility, character and conscience. But if Maritain is right about this larger problem, can we in the university even hope to bring such issues back to bear on our work?

Before I answer that question, I would observe that in the day when the first public universities were founded, there were also profound societal fractures and tensions. There were heated debates over federal versus state control, individual rights versus public responsibilities, slavery versus emancipation, and secular versus religious authority.

In fact, these tensions were part of the reason public universities were

⁹ Joseph Pappin, III, "Maritain's Ethics for an Age in Crisis," in Deal W. Hudson and Matthew J. Mancini, eds., *Understanding Maritain: Philosopher and Friend*. (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987), p. 292.

brought into existence. In late eighteenth-century South Carolina, for example, the Upstate and the Lowcountry were engaged in a struggle for political and economic power. The General Assembly decided to build South Carolina College in the center of the state in order to provide a central place where young men from both areas could come together.

I have already described the words of the Latin motto on our seal. It is worth noting as well that beneath those words on the seal appear two figures, one representing Liberty, and the other the Goddess of Learning, Minerva. On the seal, they are shaking hands, their weapons and shields at rest. As the founders of the university believed, learning, liberty and peace stand together. Diverse interests can come together for the common good. Freedom does not necessarily mean strife, relativism, or anarchy; it can also mean peaceful agreement and understanding.

I wonder: If *Maritain's sense* of our dilemma inspires him to a renewed, holistic vision of the university, does *our* contemporary crisis likewise call us to a higher moral purpose and responsibility? As Maritain wrote in words that echo the ideals of the first public universities, ideals that seem needed today, "To the very extent that it is entrusted with an all-important function in the common good, [education] is bound in conscience to feel responsible toward the entire community, and to take into consideration the requirements of the general welfare."¹⁰

Today, what does such a responsibility entail? I believe it entails that we admit two things:

One, that because the university will shape its culture and society whatever it does, it must *recognize outright* and *advance formally* the notion that certain forms of knowing and behavior are more legitimate to society than others. Every competing interest and ideology does not have equal weight. There *are* methods of reason and debate that provide a way to make sound intellectual, ethical, and responsible choices. More than recognizing this fact, the university should bring such issues to the foreground of its attention—rather than pretend it can do its work responsibly without engaging them directly.

Second, the university should admit that if it is going to shape its students' lives and inevitably its society, it must incorporate within the students' experiences those realms of knowing that are not necessarily quantifiable. Matters of values and ideals require us to engage aspects of human experience *beyond* the realm of measurement. They require the application

¹⁰ Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, p. 99.

of theology, philosophy and other humanities that deal with matters of conscience and spirit.

My point here is not to suggest at all that we should diminish attention to science or the quantifiable. I know better, having spent the better part of my life as a physicist. On this note, I have been pleased to learn that Maritain took a close look at the “new physics” of his day with admiration. He observed, “Few spectacles are as beautiful and moving for the mind as that of physics thus advancing toward its destiny like a huge throbbing ship.”¹¹ Thus engaged by physics, Maritain also sought to evaluate its implications for his theories of knowing. He wrote, “It is fitting that our reflection should linger a moment over the New Physics, not to indulge in any rash prophecies on the future of its theories, but to see whether its scientific progress confirms or invalidates the epistemological principles we have been trying to establish up to this point.”¹²

The relevance of Maritain’s example is not so much that he explored physics with empathy and interest. It is that he, the philosopher, explored a field that depends upon quite different methods than his own, methods based in quantification.

As I have noted, the university needs various approaches and disciplines for its credibility and for the quality of its contributions to society. Maritain’s example suggests that it also needs scholars crossing the hard lines of their specialty—and bringing back into their work a *holistic* conception of human experience.

The questions arise: Are we just federations of independent disciplines split into two ways of thinking? Or can we admit that the way of the scientific method and the quantitative, and the way of the humanistic and the spiritual, can not only co-exist but can *co-contribute* to human understanding? Are we ready to insist that faculty make this happen? Are we ready to insist that our own universities make this happen?

We might think of the crossroad of the university as resting upon two tectonic plates. One is the rational and quantitative, the other the humanistic and spiritual. Firmly interlocked, the foundation is strong. Too great a rift between them, and collapse must follow. As Lincoln reminds us in his allusion to Scripture, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.”¹³

We know the scientific method has proven its place in the university.

¹¹ Jacques Maritain, *Distinguish to Unite or The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. under the supervision of Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Charles Scribners’ Sons, 1959), p. 154.

¹² *Ibid.*, 155.

¹³ Abraham Lincoln, *Great Speeches* (New York: Dover, 1991), p. 25.

However, the university cannot deny that unquantifiable forces of human nature also have a place in the understanding we seek. Aren't there other realms of experience that belong—as they have been expected to belong since the beginning—in the work of the public university?

I have noted how the contributions of the university build slowly but steadily, through the gauntlet of skepticism. Whatever fields seek to be a part of this dialogue must also justify themselves upon the highest standards of reason, scholarship, and integrity. But if they *do* justify themselves accordingly, if they apply the methods and practical reason that undergird the university's moral authority, they can help us choose best practices from worst, right ideas from wrong.

We must seek to benefit from their wisdom. Otherwise, we have stunted the conversation from the beginning. Otherwise, the university no longer serves as a crossroad, but as a one-way street which leads to dogma. I fear that is the pathway to placing justice in the hands of those with the most power, rather than in the minds of those with the soundest reasoning and principles. Where down that road lies the common good?

Maritain's vision of our society provokes these kinds of issues for the public university. These institutions must re-assume the entire responsibility with which our citizens first entrusted us. The university's work should rest not simply upon practicality and measurability, but also upon a noble and holistic conception of human beings and their education. Such idealism, grounded in reason, can perhaps offer us the *centripetal* force of ethics and civility needed in our age of *centrifugal* fragmentation.

In closing, I would point again to that image of the crossroad. As I have suggested, the public university was intended to be a crossroad in which the next generation of leaders could come together around the idea of civic virtue and the common good. Today, do we admit that the public university should do more than skill its students? Do we admit that matters of conscience, civic obligation, and virtue also have a role in the educational process? Do we accept that there are *many* forms of legitimate understanding that can contribute to this higher ethical and civil responsibility?

Finally, if we believe that the future of our society requires a shared conception of what, in particular, constitutes a "*good society*," do we also believe that the public university should help *define*, *build* and *advance* this common good?

I propose these as questions worthy of direct debate within the public university. More than that, I propose that our society expects us to confront such questions. I do not propose to know the answers. I do propose that the university should.