

## *Education: Restoring the Goal of Development to the Ideal of Learning*

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There are many reasons for pride over the present state of our universities, but equally many reasons for dissatisfaction. Sometimes the terrific successes of this glorious academic system can strike us as the systematically terrifying glorification of success that is merely academic. The luxuriant profusion of inquiry and the truly awesome discoveries of some research are as exhilarating on the campus as a simple walk down Broadway of Fifth Avenue for any visitor to New York City—the throb and hum cannot fail to affect heart and mind very deeply. But reflection on what goes on behind the glitz gives us pause.

Debates about a college's core-curriculum, for example, easily degenerate into turf-battles. These battles are fought by professors who regularly employ articulate arguments about their visions of what constitutes a desirable pattern of education for undergraduate students, but whose loyalties are actually stronger and clearer to their disciplines than to their institutions or to the ideal of a truly well-rounded education of young persons. But besides reminding us of the deep-seated stubbornness of human nature in all of us, reflection on this phenomenon points to a certain disintegration in the understanding of what "education" means. The diversification of disciplines over the centuries-long history of the university has certainly been fruitful for the resolution of countless theoretical and practical problems, but the task of giving and getting an integrated education has often been sacrificed in the fragmentation that professional competence inevitably requires.

My thesis is that the problem is not just a matter of weakening a given curriculum in the compromises made to find common ground, for instance, by reducing the portions devoted to philosophy and theology so as to in-

crease the portions devoted to the social sciences, or by focusing less on broadly humane concerns so as to leave more time for studies in one's major. Even if this is often the ground of which we have to fight these important battles, it is not the ground I would choose if I could. These are important concerns, but in all honesty most current approaches to teaching even the liberal arts, philosophy, and theology do not sufficiently address the question of the formative and developmental aspects of learning. They too have taken on the marks of the modern, academic culture with all of its professionalism and have focused on the fact that there is so much to learn. Teachers of these subjects often adopt methodologies more appropriate to the specialized sciences in their teaching. Programs of values clarification, or ethics courses that ask students to educe some least common denominator principles of ethics from the analyses of the toughest and most controversial of current moral problems, are only the most egregious examples of the trendy inclination to think that morality is a subject that can be well-handled by sincere attempts at the objective (or even "sincere and sympathetic") presentation of vast amounts of "relevant data" and the careful contrast of "competing positions and arguments" for the sake of personal evaluation and selective appropriation by the relatively inexperienced minds of students who have vicariously been made aware of these "life options" by techniques of outcome-based education.

Even the teachers most successful at stimulating in students a personal engagement with the material taught are part of a university-system that has replaced the psychic and spiritual development of persons as the goal of education with the mastery of some set of "learnables" (not just facts, but various kinds of theories, sometimes highly complex—in short, whatever can be learned by observation or instruction). Nor are subsequent professional programs with extremely arduous training programs like law or medicine exempt from this criticism, for in fact they are not organized for the formation of the person but are specifically designed for the formation of professionals—and we certainly do want professional competence in these areas. Perhaps along the way the importance of a good bed-side manner in a physician or the indispensability of cultivating in every lawyer and potential judge a heart for justice can be poignantly suggested by personal contact in the course of an internship; but it is rightly regarded as not something one can be "taught" in a curriculum, and it is the rare exception among the courses designated as medical ethics and jurisprudence in medical schools and law schools that goes beyond discussion of the relevant code of professional conduct and the more successful ways of handling malfeasance and malpractice.

The privatization of moral ideals is so pervasive that even well-intending and deeply humane academics who personally hold profound notions about the meaning of human life and its relation to the Transcendent would question the notion that there is any normative vision of the person that could be desired as the goal of education, for education has come for them to be identified as the transmission of various learnables and the acquisition of the habits of thinking pertinent to a discipline, not the formation of the person. This is ultimately the reason, in my judgment, why ethics courses make so little impact on students—in theory it ought to be possible to convince people of what is right by giving them good reasons, and even to teach natural law ethics with an emphasis on the needs of civil life and without elaborate argumentation about the metaphysical grounds of natural law in the Author of nature; but in practice, all this will be in vain unless we accompany such teaching with initiation into *an entire pattern of life* that reinforces good reasons with virtuous practices and provides the sort of activity (such as religious ritual) that symbolizes these beliefs in a concrete way of living.

At the heart of the rejection of any demonstration of moral truths is a faulty conception of freedom, a libertarian conception, which, in my judgment, has to be dealt with by maturation of the person to the point of accepting duties, law and necessities in the fashion of a realistic adult. Until that degree of psychic maturity dawns, I doubt that other patterns of moral reasoning that deal with the objectively good and bad uses of one's free will are going to make much of a dent in a mind that has gotten stuck in an adolescent stage of confidence in one's own powers and abilities. In fact, I suspect that it is this which Aristotle meant by his remark that the young are not ready for ethics because of a lack of experience.<sup>1</sup>

My purpose here is to examine just one aspect of this phenomenon in light of the wisdom of thinkers like Jacques Maritain and Christopher Dawson on the proper conception of the purpose of higher education, for all too often the ideal of learning, noble as it is, seems to have crowded out the ideal of human development in our universities. They ought to be companions. Thus, I want neither to impugn the realm of unrestricted research, nor to praise it, though there are reasons for doing both. I want neither to attack nor to defend the prized claims of academic freedom, or the merits of one course of study rather than another. Rather, I want to raise a question about university education that is like the question we sometimes raise about tele-

<sup>1</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* I.3 1095a2ff.

vision: granted there may be problems about the nature of many shows on TV, even if the content of a given show is unobjectionable, isn't there also a profound problem with the very form of this medium? Like the even more enticing new forms of electronic media, TV combines the excitement of oral and visual means of communication with the mass-market outreach, the dynamic flow of subjectivity, and the exact iterability that once made the print media so revolutionary, and this change in our communications has had profound effect on the way people get their information, how they relate to other people, and how they understand their society. This is not to claim, of course, that most of us who teach at the university level are anywhere near as exciting as the videos which entertain our students and persuade them about questions of value when they are not even noticing that such questions are in play. Sometimes the best we can hope for in practice is the growth of a taste for a live performance, the way going to a concert or a play is better than seeing even the best recording.

The similarity I have in mind here is the question of form. I am not raising a Luddite objection to the classroom use of videos or the presentation of interesting lecturers by means of telecommunication—in fact, I rather welcome all sorts of things like that. My question is about form: has the form of higher education not been bent seriously out of shape by taking the purpose of such education to be learning, to the comparative exclusion of personal development? The *prima facie* case for this position is clear from some sociological considerations: the teachers at nearly all universities are unconnected with what goes on most hours of the day for their university students, and what care there is for these other hours is in the hands of student-development “professionals.” The mere division of labor here implied is not in itself odious. In fact, it is interesting to see how advanced the techniques of personnel management now applied to student populations have progressed among student development staffs, but it is usually regrettable to see the ends for which they use their skills. The problem is thus a lack of insight and often a lack of agreement about what constitutes real virtue in persons, so that the “message” given to most university students either tends to be uniformly perilous when the usual unspoken “agreement” is in place that morals are an entirely private business of our students, or, at best, schizophrenic, as in those cases where academic instruction still talks a good line about objective morality but there is little in the organization of their residential life that reinforces or encourages the practice of such virtues as prudence, generosity to neighbors, real chastity, or moderation in pleasure-seeking.

As professionals in a given discipline, most academics now identify

themselves with their discipline and devote what time they can spare from the busy-ness of their schedules to continued learning within their disciplines. Invariably they never have enough time for that as it is, what with the bureaucracy of committee work and the countless administrative tasks that spring up, let alone the vast time demands of modern technological living and the unavoidable consumption of time spent commuting—and all of that secondary (I do hope) to questions of family and personal needs. Those outside of academe never understand how teachers at a university consider themselves working full-time when their formal classroom obligations amount to six hours a week, or maybe nine, or (perish the thought) twelve! And yet for such little contact time, increased by however many office hours a professor keeps (and my observation is that such hours are precious few for many), academic life is legitimately very busy already. The demands of keeping up in one's discipline, not to mention advancing the state of that discipline by one's own research and publication, invariably make us seek out the soft spots in the schedule that confronts us for extra time, and I submit that the chief soft spot is found in the almost unquantifiable labors of forming students, for we can much more easily justify the time spent on the personal appropriation and transmission of learning. In fact, we can even quantify much of academic work for purposes of tenure, promotion and salary-adjustment evaluations: teaching can be measured by the number of students and credit-hours (and in some cases by peer or student evaluations), service can be measured by the number of committees and the amount of grants received, and scholarship can be measured by square-inch published, multiplied by the degree of prestige of the press or journal. But as I suggested earlier, my objection is not to any of these things in principle, any more than it would be to TV's content in principle, for there clearly is programming of high quality available. These are generally good things in themselves and essential to the modern university as presently constituted. We could not work without them.

My question then has to do with how we conceive the university and whether our present conception has not contributed to the current cultural morass by forgetting the developmental aspect of education in the present concentration on learning. I do not mean to suggest that there is any absolute distinction between the learnables and the developmentals, for all processes of learning (whether the techniques of pottery-making or blanket-weaving in a "primitive" culture, or the technical know-how involved in good writing, higher mathematics, and basic chemistry in our own "more advanced" culture) do entail some genuine types of inner development, but often so very little inner development of habits and virtues that this distinc-

tion is easy to use in practice to identify what would make for psychic or spiritual growth as opposed to advancement in technical understanding or in theoretical knowledge. The relative passivity of most college students in class, for example, suggests that there has been a certain psychic development promoted by our culture (the ability to sit still and cooperate in the course of primary and secondary education), but relatively little other psychic maturation can be presumed (witness the virtually unassailable moral relativism that meets even the best presented academic arguments to the contrary as a justification for lax moral conduct and religious indifference).

The great paradox of this situation is that the very affluence which has made university life and the other attainments of high culture (art, music, literature, and so on) possible (just imagine how utterly impossible these would be in a culture organized around the struggle for survival) has distracted educators away from the more difficult tasks of fostering personal growth and real psychic and spiritual development, in favor of transmitting what can be learned, not just in high schools, but in the smorgasbord of the university (just listen to our own complaining about what students didn't get on their last exam, despite our pellucid lectures!).

Perhaps a brief historical note will be helpful. The origins of the institution of the university in medieval cathedral schools shows the original intention of integrating all the learning with an entire way of living, and a religious one at that, whose structured habits of prayer and communal life were designed to live out the lessons of the classroom. The rise of universities as such already encouraged not just the ramification of the disciplines and the professionalization of the teachers but the compartmentalization of the lives of students. University life in the present day is simply reaping the fruits of these early seeds, now that the protective husks of the religious purposes present at the foundation of many institutions of higher learning have long fallen away.<sup>2</sup> It is no surprise that even prior to the Reformation the scholastic method that developed for theology and law in the medieval university was already being attacked for substituting logic-chopping and the mere training of the mind for spiritual maturity in habits of prayer and the formation of the whole person required for experiential knowledge of God. Not only did the whole raft of specialized studies that now rightfully claim to be departments in their own right emerge from philosophy, but

<sup>2</sup> See George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University* (Oxford: University Press, 1994).

“the university gradually transformed theology from a developmental to a learnable.”<sup>3</sup> The very greatness of great scholastic theologians like Albert the Great, Bonaventure and Aquinas is much dependent on their early initiation as members of the new, reformed mendicant orders with well-discerned programs of forming their spiritual lives in the faith long before their years of university teaching and research. To chart the course of the evolution of the modern university is to trace the growth of what Dawson calls “the crisis of Western education”<sup>4</sup>—for the flourishing of the academy and its social dominance in all areas of professional and systematic knowledge was progressively emancipated from the authority of divine revelation and the mediation of institutions like church and family for the education of conscience (all this is now considered private and subjective). This has resulted in a population more highly cultivated in mental skills and technical knowledge than in faith, practical charity, or even a common morality. As Dawson put it in his 1947 Gifford Lectures, “We are faced with a spiritual conflict of the most acute kind, a sort of social schizophrenia which divides the soul of society between a non-moral will to power served by inhuman techniques and a religious faith and a moral idealism which have no power to influence human life.”<sup>5</sup> Jacques Maritain makes a similar observation about the real goals of education: “What is most important in education is not the job of education, and still less that of learning. . . . The teaching of morality, with regard to its intellectual bases, should occupy a great place in school and college education. Yet that right appreciation of practical cases which the ancients called *prudentia*, and which is an inner vital power of judgment developed in the mind and backed up by well-directed will, cannot be replaced by any learning whatsoever.”<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the task of the philosopher is to seek wisdom about the formation that should be part of holistic education. But in the time that remains, let me turn from these more theoretical considerations to two practical suggestions. Without presuming to suggest any easy ways to rectify the whole situation, I would like to call attention first to the need to re-integrate the

<sup>3</sup> Paul Quay, *The Mystery Hidden for Ages in God* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), p. 400.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Dawson, *The Crisis of Western Education* (Steubenville, Ohio: Franciscan University Press, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Dawson, *Religion and Culture* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), p. 217.

<sup>6</sup> Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1943), p. 23.

average undergraduate's day at college. Our own modest efforts at Fordham University (not my idea, by the way, but a program in which I have happily been a participant the past two years, the brainchild of Fr. John Piderit, S.J., now the President of Loyola University of Chicago) are what occasioned this paper. I serve as "chaplain and tutor" at "Queen's Court Residential College"—the "Master" is my colleague and friend, Fr. John Conley, S.J., also in the Fordham Philosophy Department. Queen's Court is a lovely old stone building that houses 86 freshman (next year 145, when repairs are finished on a wing of the building now closed). Students have to choose to live there (there is no special screening process), pay a little extra for the special programs, and accept the policy that there will be no loud noise (guess who gets to help decide what loud is too loud?) twenty-four hours a day; we had about 200 applicants for the 86 positions this past year. Some, no doubt, come exclusively for the guarantee of quiet, but most by far quickly get into the swing of the place. Two of their classes (theology and literature in the fall, history and philosophy in the spring) are taught in a classroom on the ground floor—just having the teachers come to their residence makes a certain contribution to the integration of their studies and the rest of their living. We do not make any effort to regulate the whole of their days, but there certainly are plenty of "programs." At the top of the list is "Knight Court" (named in honor of the Queen, whose statue is in the courtyard), held every evening at 11:00 P.M. in "Bishops Lounge," a large hall on the first floor, so named from the stained-glass windows of the coats-of-arms of the bishops who have been graduated from Fordham over the years. It is a gracious commons, about a hundred feet long, with large tables, oriental rugs, a fire place, rimmed with book cases crammed with books of all sorts. By day the place is to be perfectly silent—a quiet, beautiful place to study. But by 11 P.M. (Monday through Thursday) about half our number chooses to assemble to hear one of their number who has been assigned speak from a lectern in the center of the room on a subject of his or her choice for ten to fifteen minutes, followed by cookies and milk—a bit of socializing before they return to studying or turn in for the day. We have had many stories about their families and about family vacations, but we have also heard about the rules for rugby, the way one figures out wind chill factor, and what it's like to work for the summer in the mail room of a maximum security prison in upstate New York. Knight Court is intended as an exercise in public speaking joined to a study break for socializing. But along with other such programs (for example, a formal debate called a "Disputatio," a talent show we call "Art Court," and the every other Monday "Common Dinner" which begins with pretzels and juice in the Master's

Suite for the host-floor and some invited faculty members and that continues with a short program and then dinner together in the Faculty Dining Room), our hope is to see the development of friendships and loyalty beyond what the average dormitory accomplishes in the direction of preparing modern cave-dwellers for apartment living. Thus far we have soft-pedalled religious programs, but there is a steady group who attends the Mass celebrated at Queen's Court on Thursday evenings (at 10:00 P.M.!). Fr. Piderit once led a twenty-mile walking pilgrimage from our Bronx campus to the Church that was frequented by St. Elizabeth Anne Seton at the very foot of Manhattan, and I hope to repeat that as soon as my walking legs are in shape! As you can see, we have a long way to go, and for all the enthusiasm this program arouses, I am quite sure that most of our 700 freshmen would not be interested, even if we had the buildings and the staff.

Secondly, I want to call your attention to a proposal by Father Paul Quay as an example of how the university could better serve the personal and cultural development of its students by reconfiguring one important element of the curriculum; he calls for a change in a discipline that ought to be most amenable to such change but will probably not be, university-level theology as taught in religious institutions. Instead of modeling itself on the methods of other disciplines, and thus often leaving students with the impression that there is an impressive body of speculation and perhaps even that there is some real knowledge there, but a body of theory that they generally do not find personally compelling, theology could organize its instruction as education in religion in a way more suitable to promote personal maturation (of mind, heart and whole person, individually and socially). Quay's idea is to focus this part of education on using the spiritual senses of the Scriptures that have been downplayed by Catholics and Protestants alike in favor of their literal (or historical) meaning over the centuries since the Reformation. The purpose of this concentration would be to bring about an understanding of: 1) the way the Scriptures present the life of Christ as recapitulating the whole life of Israel, but completely and perfectly where Israel's life was incomplete and imperfect; and then 2) the way they present a pattern of life in Christ as the way for the individual Christian and for any given culture to sanctify the stages of one's own life and the patterns of life and growth available to that culture. Without going into all the details to be found in this remarkable proposal, let me simply summarize Quay's insights as an expansion on the idea of "recapitulation by Christ and in Christ" introduced by St. Paul and championed by St. Irenaeus of Lyons. What Quay has discovered in this line of reading the Scriptures according to their diverse spiritual senses (including the literal mean-

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ing, which has been the main concern of modern exegetes) is a path to an authentic route of spiritual development, including the natural course of human physical and psychic development as well as moral growth in the virtues. What he proposes is a way of envisioning academic theological study that may well also assist growth in the life of faith.

A direct carry-over to some other disciplines (without any loss to their independence as appropriate) readily suggests itself, for what is intended here is formation in how to read the different levels of meaning in a text (rather like the work of literature), just as pondering life-stages now comes, if at all, within psychology and thinking about the relation of individuals and cultural forces comes within the social sciences. Admittedly, this is but one component of a reformation of university education, but, I think, one that is very important for making concrete what Maritain called for, especially in the section entitled "The Schools in Spiritual Life" within *Education at the Crossroads*.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 84–87.