

The University and Human Values: Introspection

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The Editor.

It is reported that Socrates, the patron saint of law professors and many other teachers, was convicted and sentenced to death by the people of Athens on a three-count indictment: for refusing to recognize the gods recognized by the state, for introducing other and new divinities, and for "corrupting" the youth. It is the hope of this self-claimed follower of Socrates that this audience will be above demanding that sort of remedy for what I say tonight.

The charge by Meletus that Socrates corrupted the youth was based, in part, upon his method of teaching — a constant questioning of assumptions demanding introspection of one's most basic beliefs — and, in part, upon Socrates' belief that the acquisition of knowledge consists not in learning the answers but in searching for the questions. In the "Apology" Plato quotes Socrates as saying:

"I shall never cease from the practice and teaching of philosophy, exhorting any one whom I meet and saying to him after my manner: You, my friend, — a citizen of the great and mighty and wise city of Athens — are you not ashamed of heaping up the greatest amount of money and honour and reputation, and caring so little about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul, which you never regard at all?

[I] do nothing but go about persuading you all, old and young alike, not to take thought for your persons or properties, but first and chiefly to care about the greatest improvement of the soul. I tell you that virtue is not given by money, but from virtue comes money and every other good of man, public as well as private."

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root of knowledge and the source of our understanding of human values. That search was also the basis for the condemnation of Socrates. The tensions aroused by this unending search for knowledge and values have changed little since Socrates' time: the community feels discomfort because teachers persist in challenging students to question orthodox beliefs and teachers feel disappointment because the community persists in heaping up the greatest amount of money, honour and reputation on defenders of the accepted and often appears to care little for wisdom, virtue and truth. In some segments of the popular mind the function of education too often means the filling up of minds passing along the academic assembly line with information — orthodox information one can practically use in the pursuit of wealth and reputation in our materialistic society. The function of education is not viewed, as Socrates would have it, as questioning the given and developing an understanding of the unity of knowledge in the pursuit of truth. The university is not viewed, as Cardinal Newman would have it, as a place for

teaching the young universal knowledge. Each of us on this panel agree that providing a liberal education is at the heart of the university enterprise; that a liberal education is the study of and reflection upon the finest expressions of the human spirit and intellect; that a free inquiry into all values is essential for the university to impart a liberal education; and, that academic freedom is essential if a free inquiry into all values is to be realized.

The tensions of Socrates' time remain, however, between demands that the university teach the practical while defending the orthodox and the need for true education to explore the basic assumptions of orthodox beliefs while deemphasizing practical knowledge; demands to defend values and knowledge experience has taught are worth preserving while entertaining questioning of those values and that knowledge to foster progress; demands to teach practical skills for employment purposes and the need to explore wisdom in order to make a practical life worthwhile; and, demands for the university and its teachers to hold values and be open to all sources of wisdom, yet maintain the capacity to question all values in the unending search for truth.

The modern university, when it comes to the reconciliation of these conflicting pressures and academic goals, might be expected to be a place of significant contradictions. Universities claim to be academic institutions dedicated to the quest for knowledge and truth, but devote substantial resources to the production of athletic spectacles ancient Rome would envy. The need for research funds has driven many disciplines in the academy to research for the sake of the practical answers required by the source of the financing, rather than research for the sake of finding new questions to ask. Demands for training in the practical overwhelm the capacity to provide each student with a liberal education. Too often, the publication of new knowledge has become the byproduct of an artificial ritual to gain tenure or an advanced degree, rather than the end product of cre-



ative teaching, intellectual curiosity and the unending search for truth. The very complexity of the modern university necessarily detracts from the time available for quiet contemplation and creative effort. We have committees at every level to cope with every conceivable problem, except the undue drain upon our most precious commodity — time for quiet reflection.

Time for quiet reflection is essential to what we do because a university cannot succeed and its faculty cannot function as true teachers without a deep understanding of the values underlying one's field of knowledge — and the capacity to both reflectively challenge the values held, and tolerate constructive challenges to those values by others. There is an even deeper dilemma here — one exemplified by a current controversy in legal education over the accreditation of law schools affiliated with religious institutions pursuing missionary goals in education. The accrediting agencies have adopted a standard which permits such institutions to use religious affiliation as a standard in the admission process and in the hiring of faculty, so long as notice is given and no impairment of academic freedom takes place. Many would see these policies as inherently irreconcilable — but are they any less reconcilable than the conflict teachers often encounter in non-religious academic institutions committed to education in its finest sense? Teachers in either setting must walk an intellectual tightrope of having a set of values from which to organize their thinking and relate it to the general human condition, yet the awareness, courage and freedom to challenge those values without falling into the despair of total cynicism.

The functions of trustee of human values and challenger to those values are the heart and soul of the academic enterprise. But the responsibility of providing a liberal education and the challenge of fostering a climate in which to preserve, yet constructively challenge, human values are functions of a university subject to at least four modern-day pressures which

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compromise our most basic mission. Those pressures, forces which undermine the mission of a university no less than an unquestioning commitment to fixed theological beliefs does so, are: economic insecurity, bureaucratic complexity, a misunderstanding of the function of tenure and a false dichotomy between diverse sources of knowledge and human values.

The economic pressures of the real world coerce students to pursue the "what", rather than the "why" and teachers to pursue tenure and security for their own sake rather than knowledge for knowledge's own sake. These are understandable pressures in a world where economic security is no longer a given and there are no frontiers where the independent or the unlucky can go to carve out a new life. They are pressures which are certain to increase due to significant changes in the economy wiping out traditional employment patterns while threatening the continuation of a society with well paid middle class employment for the many. They are pressures which are accelerating the collectivization of individuals into large institutions, testing anew the ageless problem of striking a balance between the needs of the community and the needs of the individual. Like the feudalism of a prior time, many individuals find that their opportunities are limited by their status in some large institution rather than being measured by their personal worth. The willing compliance by the university in training individuals to fill such roles rather than provide them with a liberal education,

only accelerates the trend toward compromising individual rights to meet the short term needs of the collective.

We should have a deeper concern when training displaces a liberal education: the student is deprived of the means to fulfill true potential and the intellectual base from which to maximize the opportunity for a meaningful life. The study of the highest expressions of human val-



ues in our art, literature, music, law and philosophy is of great significance today in this the age of high technology, economic insecurity, the new feudalism, and the bomb. For what does it goin a person to be well trained in the mundane of the day, yet lack the ability to shift careers and the capacity to live a creative life that is worthwhile and of significance to the troubled human condition?

Pressures on teachers to teach the "what" and to pursue their own economic security can undermine the most basic functions of a university by cutting off a deeper inquiry into the "why" and chilling the courage to question the given. We give up intellectual curiosity for economic security and only mimic true teaching and real scholarship by a preoccupation with

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publishing trivia and researching the mundane. The pressure to "publish or perish" is counterproductive where it results in the publication of trivia which deserves to perish rather than be published. One wonders what Shakespeare would have thought of a 500 page Ph.D. thesis I happened upon at another university which bore the title: "Shakespeare's Use of the Imagery of A Dog in All His Plays". Were Socrates alive in this day and age, he might well say, "Those who pursue knowledge solely for the sake of a job forsake true knowledge and teachers who pursue knowledge solely for job security betray themselves and the basic function of a university."

Education in its classic sense and the search for values to guide progress in the human condition are further compromised by a second pressure of the modern world: our division into specialties with bureaucratic, as well as brick, walls dividing us. In the face of the complexities and the accumulated weight of modern knowledge, we cannot avoid the division of disciplines despite the realization that all knowledge is interconnected and true wisdom resides in the discovery of the connections and an appreciation for their significance. Universities present great opportunities for collegial interaction, yet our division into colleges, departments, disciplines, and specialties within disciplines runs the risk Cardinal Newman warned against when he asserted that one "who identifies the world with one particular scientific view is not a teacher of liberal knowledge but a narrow minded bigot." On a different plane, the building of walls between disciplines works its way into the bureaucratic processes of the institution and accentuates the gaps by virtue of competition for limited funds. It also generates a bureaucratic nightmare for attempts to circumvent the artificial walls between related disciplines in order to promote a liberal education. The divisions are a reality we have not always grappled with well, and they are ones which expand dangerously in times of economic stress and competition for limited resources.

Paradoxically the search for truth and a deeper understanding of human values might also be compromised by a third pressure the modern university must deal with: the tenure system. We cherish tenure and jealously guard the process by which it is granted or denied, because tenure is fundamental to academic freedom. In the popular mind and in the mind of too many faculty members, tenure is a guarantee of job security for the sake of job security. Tenure is no such



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thing — its primary purpose is the protection of job security in order to guarantee and promote academic freedom. The university must strenuously protect academic freedom so that the lesser but modern version of the punishment visited upon Socrates is not permitted to curb challenges to the gods favored by the state, the advocacy that new diets displace the old, or the "corruption" of the youth by challenging them to reexamine their assumptions in the process of coming to understand themselves. Subtle compromise of academic freedom can take place by a heaping up of the greatest rewards and honor upon those who seek security by not rethinking the orthodox or challenging the gods of the day, while ignoring those faculty members preoccupied by the controversial search for wisdom and truth. By the same token, when tenure is viewed as job security for its own sake, the quiet life of the lazy can displace the curiosity of the committed scholar and the easy but boring life of reading old lectures can replace the excitement of true teaching — the dynamic and creative interaction with students in the classroom.

A fourth pressure compromising a free inquiry into all values and the provision of a liberal education results from the strange assumption that there is an unbridgeable gap between the multiple sources of human knowledge and human values. In this perspective there is a world of religiously based values derived from revelation or moral reflection and one of scientifically or humanly based values derived solely from human reason. In some segments of the world that exists beyond our walls the word "humanism" has become a symbol for depravity and the words "secular humanism" are synonymous with ultimate depravity. By the same token, within the university, values derived from religious contemplation or other modes of "non-scientific" inquiry are frequently ignored and sometimes treated with contempt. The division is one which

would surprise Socrates and shock Newman. It is an artificial division of the sources for wisdom into two warring camps set in the concrete of unchallengeable assumptions. It is a false dichotomy which should give a university considerable concern because it is an expression of bigotry, an example of ignor-

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ance, and a major source of intolerance.

The artificial and polar distinction between diverse sources of knowledge and values has its roots in the belief that one has fixed and immutable truths beyond questioning — whether the source of the truth be claims that a particular individual has been given truth by divine revelation

or by pure human reason. While a university should tolerate the presence of proponents of such views and entertain reflective consideration of the truths and values advanced by such thinking, the university's heart and soul must remain above capture by the appeal of this kind of simplistic certainty. Once a university's soul is captured by this form of shallow thinking, the search for new questions is at an end, intolerance suppresses free inquiry, and progress toward a deeper wisdom and understanding is sacrificed on the altar of the security and arrogance of knowing all the answers. For a university not compromised in this way, the dilemma of having values and the capacity and freedom to challenge those values remains. It is inherent in all that we do and is the force which compels us to continue to walk the tightrope.

The role of values in true education is central because every assumption, every discovery and every judgment we make is premised upon values — moral values. Ought premises underlie every discipline from the most basic of the physical sciences to the unexamined premises of what are loosely called the social sciences and the humanities. Even our most analytic "truths" like Euclidian geometry are based upon unprovable assumptions — ought postulates which are unprovable, exist independent of one another, and cannot be derived from one another or the entire system. Morality is concerned with questions of "ought" in the pursuit of "virtue", or the discovery of that which is desirable or worthwhile. To those accustomed to thinking of morality in other worldly terms, the discoveries of ought values through human reason unaided by "revealed truths" are not alien. Indeed, for one to conclude he or she comprehends their divine revelation, in a fixed and immutable way and without the need for human reason, is a contradiction. The very act of comprehension requires the use of human reason, the mastery of language and the use of intelligence. The religion I was raised in may have learned that lesson after several hundred years

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and is only now considering exonerating Galileo for his heresy of suggesting the earth is not the center of the universe. Conversely, for modern science to escape intellectual heresy, it must admit that there is still room to argue the proposition that the earth is the center of the universe.

Pure human reason has yet to provide us with the path to truth, beauty, justice and brotherhood. Although human reason has given us much to alleviate the pain of the body and the anguish of the soul, it has also given us the nation-state, so we can fight over geography; racism



and bigotry, so we can suppress minorities; technology, so we can destroy our environment; the gun, so we can destroy each other; and the atom bomb, so we can destroy everything. Some of us, despite our apparent insignificance in terms of the endlessness of space and the shortness of our lives in light of the eternity of time, have developed the shield of intellectual arrogance to avoid contemplation of the endlessness of the infinite and the timelessness of eternity. One should not forget that it was the quest for "truth" by unaided human reason that led us to an understanding of atomic energy. It was that same "truth" which we dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki because nation states and individuals had not made comparable discoveries in the knowledge of how to live with each other peacefully and the long run values of doing so. It is the same "truth" which now holds a world and everything in it hostage; a world which has lost sight of human values in the competition between "isms" and our preoccupation with technology and political hegemony.

It is essential that the purpose of a university and the faculty's role in pursuing that purpose be understood as the conservator of human values and the relentless explorer of human values. A university must be understood as being engaged in the unending walk along a tightrope of cherishing the values of our society, culture and areas of inquiry, yet

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constantly questioning and challenging those values. The way we serve the long term interest of the society which supports us is to educate its young by "corrupting" them in the same sense the people of Athens used "corruption" to charge and condemn Socrates. Challenging students to rethink their most basic assumptions is education; forcing them to abandon their values by unreflectively substituting some other fixed assumptions is not. Responsibly calling into question the gods of the state is education; blindly challenging those gods for the sake of challenging them is not. The reflective examination of the roots of widely shared social and individual values is education; the rote repetition and non-reflective belief in such values is not. The quiet contemplation of the highest expressions of human values is education; the slavish mastery of the mundane is not. The pursuit of truth in all fields, whether it has immediate utility or not, is scholarship; research solely to obtain financial support, secure tenure, or obtain a degree is not.

Those of us charged with the crucial responsibilities of teaching and scholarship face several perils in this, the mature age of the university. Immersed in our specialties we lose sight of related fields of knowledge; confined to our habitual ways of thinking we begin to lose the capacity to rethink the moral assumptions of our discipline or specialty; attacked by the ignorant we become ignorant ourselves by failing to hear, understand and deal with the roots of ignorance. Preoccupied with the need for approval we can abandon the necessity for rigor and avoid the perils of being different or controversial; seduced by the materialistic trappings of the real world we can begin to measure success in terms of wealth and decorations rather than virtue or the quest for wisdom; convinced of the "truth" of our view of reality, we become closed-minded to other and competing views of reality; and anesthetized by the security

of the tenure system we experience the spark of finding new questions dimming and the excitement of challenging young minds by creative teaching fading into a dull routine.

It is well that we reexamine the central value of the university as both the defender and critic of societal and individual values on this the occasion of inaugurating our eleventh President. Each age has presented its own unique challenges to the basic purpose and value of a university. Mr. President, the challenges of this era are perhaps less drastic in their personal consequences than those which confronted Socrates, but they are no less serious as a threat to our fundamental institutional and individual missions. We gratefully welcome you as the anchor to our academic tightrope, confident that it will remain taut but will not break under your stewardship, in the unending but exciting paradox of true education. We have a faith that true education is the path to understanding and contributing to the evolution of human values. We have a trust, a well-founded one, that the forces of compromise of our central value to the human condition will not prevail during your tenure and that Socrates' legacy will realize a new vigor at the University of Utah.

Professor Flynn currently is teaching Anti-Trust, Jurisprudence, and Regulated Industries.