A Crisis of Ends: University Education as Formative Reading

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Abstract

Beginning with Mark C. Taylor's *Crisis on Campus*, and its critique of the structure and delivery of contemporary higher education, this essay argues that if there is a crisis in education, it is not technical, not reducible to the delivery of education. If there is a crisis, it lies in the contemporary world's misunderstanding of the goals or ends of the university. Borrowing Antonin's Sertillanges' account of reading from *the Intellectual Life*, the essay concludes by suggesting that the goal of university education is formation of the mind, not mastery, edification, of entertainment.

> The cause of all things is like a torrent, it sweeps everything along. How puny are these little public men, wisely practical as they believe themselves to be. They are like children with running noses. What then is a man to do? Do what nature now requires. Start now, if this be granted to you; do not look around to see whether anyone will know about it. Do not expect Plato's republic; be satisfied with the smallest step forward, and consider this no small achievement. (. . .) The work of philosophy is simple and modest. Do not lead me into arrogant pride.[1]

We should be wary of "little public men". The problem of a running nose can be solved easily enough with a handkerchief; the child's naïve hope that a nose will not run again after being wiped is sure to be corrected with the passing of time; the presumption that running noses can be eradicated altogether by experts in nasal technology is prideful

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[1] Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, translated by G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 9.29.

folly, a pathology likely to be incurable, and if it is perchance cured, it will be only by abandoning the arrogant expectation that anything human, by which I also mean anything finite and temporal, could ever be flawless. Little public men think they can make the world conform to their wills; the rest of us know it is better if our wills, at least in most cases, conform to the world. Of course, humility does not preclude working to make the world better: a running nose calls for wiping, injustice for redress, stupidity for intelligent refutation, and ignorance for education. We need not expect Plato's republic in order to hope that we might actually make something better, however modest that improvement might be, but we also should not presume that by making something a tiny bit better we will best even Plato's ideal. The city of man is not, and never will be, the city of God.

Whatever it is, the university has problems, has had problems, and always will have problems. There may very well be more problems today than there were at some points in the history of the university, but I suspect there are also fewer problems today than at others.[2] Today's university is neither the realization of the form of the university itself nor the utter perversion of it. It may be the case, for instance, that incoming students are on average weaker writers, readers, speakers, and critical thinkers than students were yesterday; that faculty are on average more concerned with publication than with teaching; that universities are becoming more bureaucratic and governed by technocrats with an eye to efficiency rather than educators committed to student learning and self-cultivation; that undergraduate programs lack cohesion; that graduate programs have become over-specialized and thus ill-equipped to prepare their students for anything other than academic careers in research intensive universities with graduate programs, an expectation that appears increasingly unreasonable. Although I suspect at least some do, I am not certain any of these problems actually obtain. If they do obtain, contemporary educators would do well to address them, but without expecting to be the architects of the first perfect human institution in history. Let us aspire to be humble repair-persons, not arrogant and prideful little public men and women.

Moreover, focusing only on problems loses sight of what might actually be salutary about the contemporary university: students do typically

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[2] See, for example, Charles Homer Haskins, *The Rise of Universities* [1923] (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957). One of the great virtues of Haskins' study of the medieval origins of the university is its ability to show the modern reader how the medieval university is at once drastically different from our own and surprisingly similar. Haskins points to this duality when he writes, "the Middle Ages are very far away, farther from us in some respects than is classical antiquity, and it is very hard to realize that men and women, then and now, are after all much the same human beings" (p. 93). Hard though it may be, it is worth our while to remember that universities have educated and always will educate *human* beings. Historical variations are not insignificant, but they also ought not to obscure the fact that there is something universal underlying university education, namely, human nature.

leave university with better reading, writing, and thinking skills than they had before entering; graduates actually do make useful contributions to economic and political life; university education is no longer the privilege of the sons of the wealthy and ruling elites, and as such there are more young people – and not-so-young people – than ever before gaining the opportunity to increase their chances for personal growth and economic success; over-specialized or not, many scholars and researchers make genuine advancements in their fields, at least some of which benefit others; some university administrators do actually direct and manage their universities in order to help accomplish all that is positive about the university. However many problems there might be in the university, there are not only problems.

How problematic, then, are these problems and how much are they mitigated – if at all – by the university's successes? Following a growing trend in studies of higher education, Mark Taylor's *Crisis on Campus* concludes that the problems are many and so severe that a total reformation of the university is needed. Taylor writes:

> [Colleges] and universities are not adequately preparing students for life in a rapidly changing and increasingly competitive world. As emerging technologies continue to transform how we manage information and acquire knowledge, students will need to develop new skills and even learn different ways of thinking, reading and writing. The accelerating rate of globalization will make it necessary for people to learn more about other societies and cultures. These developments also pose new challenges and opportunities for the organization and delivery of higher education.[3]

Put simply, colleges and universities do not prepare students for successful civic and economic participation in the twenty-first century. They are out of step with the times, applying an eighteenth century model of education to a world that has fundamentally changed since then.[4] The contemporary university fails utterly, and it does so because it is insufficiently contemporary, insufficiently timely; it is an antiquated institution that, by privileging theory over practice, knowledge over skill, and traditional disciplines over new areas of inquiry that transcend restrictive epistemic boundaries, cannot address current challenges. Taylor's view seems to be that the contemporary world is practical, technical, and epistemically amorphous; a system of education fitted to it is needed.

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[3] Mark C. Taylor, *Crisis on Campus: a Bold Plan for Reforming Our Colleges and Universities* (New York: Knopf, 2010), pp. 3-4.

[4] See Taylor, *Crisis on Campus*, pp. 48-67. For a similar complaint, see Ian Angus, *Love the Questions: University Education and the Enlightenment* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2009). The basic model critics like Taylor and Angus have in mind is Kant's. See Immanuel Kant, "the Contest of Faculties," in H.S. Reiss, ed., *Kant: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 176-190.

Consider the case of Rita Sophie Bragiuli, a young woman struggling to find a graduate program and graduate supervisors to accommodate her cross-disciplinary concerns. In an email to Taylor, she writes:

> The course of study which I have proposed is inherently interdisciplinary, and I can't begin to describe how difficult it has been for me to explain this. I plan to study religion through the lens of psychology, both experimental and theoretical. I'd like to understand the impact religious specifics (texts, philosophies, rituals, etc.) through history have on the mind of the religious individual today, and how that implicates this person's behavior (from belief to going to temple/church to conversion to acts of violence). Though this study is extremely broad, and incorporates fields of religion, history, anthropology, ethnography, philosophy, and psychology, the tools to complete this study are out there, and can have real impact on how we understand the modern religious mind. (. . .) I still cannot find an advisor who studies something like this. Despite the fact that universities may not be ready to follow this route, from talking to many future graduate students and scholars I've realized that the younger generation is craving such connections as well as applicability.[5]

Taylor is very sympathetic to Ms. Bragiuli's cause, and impressed with her "level of sophistication" and "projected plan of study;" indeed, "what she is proposing is the kind of work we should be encouraging rather than discouraging."[6] Taylor does not quite explain why this project should be encouraged, or why Bragiuli's buffet approach to religion is better than the very same composed disciplinary meal that helped produced scholars like Taylor. Nonetheless, he treats her case as emblematic of the modern academy's ineptitude in accommodating students, and in meeting students on their own terms and in their own world. In response, Taylor proposes supplementing – if not substituting – the traditional disciplinary structure of university programs and faculty research with what he calls Emerging Zones, areas of research and teaching that would not be bound by old and irrelevant categories but by current issues and real-world concerns, presumably like the impact religious specifics of all sorts over all of time have on the modern religious individual's mind and conduct. These zones would be fundamentally interdisciplinary, appealing to the methods and results of all disciplines; the whole of academe would be a tool box to be used in an Emerging Zone and the scholar a true *bricoleur*, a Jack- or Jill-of-all-trades, using whatever techniques appear suited to the concerns that happen to be at hand.[7] Novelty and practical relevance would be celebrated and ultimately guaranteed by a policy to approve each zone for seven years, at

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[5] Taylor, *Crisis on Campus*, pp. 8-9.
[6] Taylor, *Crisis on Campus*, p. 10.
[7] Taylor, *Crisis on Campus*, p. 145.

which point the zone would be "discontinued, renewed or folded into other programs."[8]

Although Taylor's challenge to the disciplinary structure of the university may appeal to anyone who fears that contemporary disciplines have become too specialized and esoteric, his view also implicitly denies the universality of knowledge that has not only always been central to university education but has for even longer been essential to all philosophy, science, and theology. The university of Emerging Zones appears to have nothing in common with the simple and straightforward university of someone like Newman, for whom, famously, the university is "a place of teaching universal knowledge."[9] A field of study that emerges all of a sudden in reaction to some particular set of circumstances, only to dissipate once those circumstances have changed yet again, is by its nature contingent not universal. The view that knowledge changes with the times and depending on utility simply cannot be squared with any traditional understanding of study, the university variety or otherwise. Josef Pieper might put this best when he contrasts education with the training of functionaries:

> Training is defined as being concerned with some one side or aspect of man, with regard to some special subject. Education concerns the whole of man; an educated man is a man with a point of view from which he takes in the whole world. Education concerns the whole man, man *capax universi*, capable of grasping the totality of existing things.[10]

There is surely nothing wrong with training for a particular and timely task, nothing wrong with cultivating a single aspect of oneself, nothing wrong with applying universal knowledge to particular life circumstances. As Jacques Maritain puts it, "the utilitarian aspect of education – which enables the youth to get a job and make a living – must surely not be disregarded, for the children of man are not made for aristocratic leisure."[11] Insofar as it is fixed on particularity, a pedagogy like Taylor's, however, does more than recognize and accommodate this utilitarian aspect; it reduces education to training. As such, it does not and cannot cultivate the whole of one's humanity. Antiquated and idealistic as it might be, if there is anything true about Newman's

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[8] Taylor, *Crisis on Campus*, p. 147.

[9] John Henry Newman, *the Idea of the University* [1852] (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1960), p. xxxvii.

[10] Josef Pieper, *Leisure: the Basis of Culture/the Philosophical Act* [1947], translated by Alexander Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009) p. 39. On the distinction between the training of functionaries, or servile education, and liberal education, see also Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943) and Christopher Derrick, *Escape from Skepticism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1977).

[11] Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, p. 10. By "aristocratic leisure", Maritain seems to mean something like laziness, not leisure in the traditional sense. All humans are made for leisure, for *skolē,* for study.

definition, the university cannot aim at cultivating particular bits of knowledge or at specialized training; these may be part of university education, but cannot be of its essence. As John Maynard Hutchins puts it, "the notion of educating a man to live in any particular time or place, to adjust him to any particular environment, is therefore foreign to a true conception of education."[12]

Much is wrong with Taylor's position and even more is wrong with his book as a whole. It is not, however, my task here to address these errors in any great detail – in any case, not any further than I have. Rather, I want to proceed from a simple observation: here is a successful and influential professional academic who thinks that higher education is in crisis and that its problems are so severe that a "bold plan for reform" is needed to save the university, its students, and its graduates as they enter the world of work. Although he may sound more alarmist than others, and his "plan for reform" may indeed be a little "bolder" than those of other critics, the spirit of Taylor's critique is not unusual. Indeed, he represents a rather common view that the modern university is in peril, and needs a fundamental transformation to survive and become relevant today. Many books have been published recently that critique the modern university.[13] These books seem to agree that there are problems and even agree about what some of the problems are, but they disagree about how those problems should be addressed. In some cases, like Taylor's, the fix lies in transforming the university to keep up with a changing and technologically radical world; in other cases, like Arthur Kronman's, the fix lies in a return to something more traditional, namely moral education; in others, like Martha Nussbaum's, the fix lies in reorienting the university to the values of liberal democratic citizenship, above all its celebration of diversity; in yet others, like Fish's, the solution is to stop trying to do too much and just worry about teaching all the pieces of knowledge professional scholars happen to have. Whatever the merits of each individual book may be, unfortunately taken as a whole these books do not get us very close to solving the university's problems; this is so not because one cannot find some good arguments in these books or some accurate observations and recommendations, but because the diversity and proliferation of such books betrays a deeper

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[12] John Maynard Hutchins, *the Higher Learning in America* [1936] (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1995), p. 66.

[13] Nothing would be gained from citing all or even most of these books here. Some of the works from which I have drawn most include James E. Côté and Anton L. Allahar, *Lowering Higher Education: the Rise of Corporate Universities and the Fall of Liberal Education* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), Frank Donoghue, *the Last Professors: the Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Arthur Kronman, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), and Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

and wider problem, namely, that there is no common understanding of the very thing that they all presume to be considering. That is to say, there is more than disagreement in this growing debate; in it we find distinct, competing, and mutually exclusive visions of the university as such. And of course, if we do not agree about what the university is, we cannot successfully diagnose its ills let alone cure them.

Is there, then, a real crisis? Do the failures of the university outweigh its successes? I think there is a crisis, but it is not where Taylor and others think it is. The core problem of university education is not technical; universities are not in crisis because they *do* something wrongly, because their instructors do not teach well enough, because their researchers do not research successfully, because administrators do not manage their institutions adequately, let alone because Deans and department Chairs do not encourage the development of Emerging Zones. I have no doubt that universities do much that is wrong, but technical mistakes are remediable, and are oftentimes relatively minor. If there is a crisis, it is that we either do not know what a university is or, which amounts to much the same in practical terms, there is no agreement about what it is. We are today, I think, mostly confused about the nature and purpose of higher education because we are mostly confused about the university itself – and this is as true of administrators and teachers as it is of students and their parents. The problem is not the doing of universities; the problem is with their being. Universities are not fundamentally deficient in means but they might be deficient with regard to ends.

Though it may appear out of place, a consideration of sin might help make the point. In *the Concept of Sin*, Josef Pieper differentiates between two kinds of mistakes, one technical, the other moral. He writes:

> [The] *first* possibility of making a false step is an "artistic error" in the strict sense, that is, the failure to get "just right" whatever goal the artist has in mind: the marksman fails to hit the bull's-eye, the surgeon nicks an organ essential for life, the engineer's calculations of a bridge's tensile strength prove to be wrong. The *second* ever-present possibility for making a false step in the realm of art and manufacture consists in the dilemma that one might reach the goal set for oneself, perhaps brilliantly, but at the same time, *for that same reason*, will have violated the universal goal of existence as a whole.[14]

Neither sort of mistake is necessarily minor, but the first is both excusable and corrigible; marksmen, surgeons, and engineers can in some cases be forgiven and can in all cases step back, retrain, and in so doing improve their chances of never making a major technical mistake

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[14] Josef Pieper, *the Concept of Sin* [1977], translated by Edward T. Oakes (South Ben: St. Augustine's Press, 2001), p. 25.

again. The second type of error is far worse, precisely because it is premised on a kind of teleological blindness or stupidity, which can tragically be paired with the highest degree of technical proficiency. The successful murderer might be skillful, but his goal is wrong; it is immoral. The murderer's error might not be incorrigible, but it is likely to be more difficult to correct than any deficiency in skill. If university teachers and administrators teach or administer wrongly, then they make the first sort of mistake, the forgivable kind – something to be corrected with pedagogical development and retraining. But if they are confused or altogether mistaken about the purpose of university education, or if no purpose governs their actions at all, then their error is more grave; their error is teleological not technical, and as such undermines the whole of the university itself. Indeed, as Neil Postman rightly puts it, "there is no surer way to bring an end to schooling than for it to have no end."[15]

My question, then, is what is the university for? And just as importantly what should it be for? In what follows, I want to take a couple of very small steps towards understanding university education, offering a view that I hope is both plausible and modest enough to achieve. There will be no bold plan for reform here – just a common sense attempt to understand the end of university education. We must, however, be careful to not confuse the word "end". That the university has an end means that it has a purpose, which it tries to advance, and actually does achieve to some non-trivial degree. It does not mean that the university finishes anything once and for all, that it is the terminus of education. As Michael Oakeshott reminds us in *the Voice of Liberal Learning*, "no one can hope to say anything significant about the university unless he understands that university education is neither a beginning nor an end, but a middle."[16] Universities neither start with blank slates nor do they put the finishing touches on anything. Whatever teachers, students, and administrators do in universities began long ago and will continue long after degree requirements are completed. Simply put, education begins before university and ends much later, likely only with death.

My goal, then, is not to grasp education as such and as a whole, but to move towards understanding the purpose of the university as an intermediate form of education. To this end, I want to suggest a useful metaphor – though it is admittedly more than a metaphor. Let us think about university education as a sort of reading. All university learning, of course, involves some reading on the part of student and teacher, a practice that is the primary method of learning in many cases. More

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[15] Neil Postman, *the End of Education: Redefining the Value of School* (New York: Vintage, 1995), p. 4.
[16] Michael Oakeshott, *the Voice of Liberal Learning* [1989] (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), p. 144.

importantly, all subjects in university are bodies of knowledge that exist independently of learners and teachers, and that must be interpreted, re-interpreted with the guidance of an expert, and grasped to some not insignificant degree. Not all learning is occasioned by texts, but all of it more or less follows this path, a hermeneutical path.[17] If this metaphor works at all, what sort of reading should university education be like? Here I want to follow Antonin Sertillanges' comments on reading from *The Intellectual Life*. According to Sertillanges, there are four ways to read: "one reads for one's formation and to become somebody; one reads in view of a particular task; one reads to acquire a habit of work and the love of what is good; one reads for relaxation."[18] Let us consider each briefly.

The first reading is what Sertillanges calls fundamental reading, a reading that forms and prepares the mind for deeper study. This reading involves a sort of mental docility, an acceptance that what one reads is worth reading because it communicates something worth learning. In effect, the fundamental reader will come to understand what the text teaches by first accepting its intellectual value. To do so, the reader must resist the temptation to dispute, to reject the teachings of the text. Of course, not every text can be altogether true, not even every great text, but the truth or falsity of the text cannot be determined without first understanding it, without first treating it as if it is true. This does not mean that fundamental reading is uncritical; it is indeed critical in the sense of understanding not just what is ostensibly evident in a text but also its underlying presuppositions and conceptual framework. The goal is to see the world as the author does, to occupy the author's world as much as is possible. However difficult it may be to do so, a reader cannot even approach this goal unless the text is allowed to show itself. In other words, fundamental reading involves the passive receptivity to the truth characteristic of genuine leisure. Pieper describes this passivity well: "leisure implies (in the first place) an attitude of non-activity, of inward calm, of silence; it means not being "busy", but letting things happen."[19] The fundamental reader lets the things of the text happen on their own terms.

The second is accidental reading, reading for mastery of some particular topic or to complete some particular task. If formation involves docility, mastery involves discipline, repetition, and effort – again not disputative effort, as if what we read is only read well if rejected. Rather the goal is to understand more deeply the best reasons for and against

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[17]   I count on the plausibility of the metaphor, not on a demonstration of its usefulness. The latter would move me too far afield. For a detailed discussion of education as interpretation see Shaun Gallagher, *Hermeneutics and Education* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

[18]   Antonin Sertillanges, *the Intellectual Life: Its Spirit, Conditions, Methods* [1934], translated by Mary Ryan (Washington: the Catholic University of America Press, 1987), p. 152.

[19]   Pieper, *Leisure: the Basis of Culture*, p. 46.

the positions espoused in the text. One becomes a master of some topic only by knowing its particulars as fully as is possible, not by seeing the whole but by grasping some part in detail. As such, the accidental reader brings his or her own goals to the text rather than letting the text show itself on its own terms. This reader "is not in a state of pure receptivity; he has his own idea, his plan; the work consulted becomes his servant."[20]

The third is edifying reading. Simply put, this is reading for moral improvement, reading from which one might learn how to live well. Typically we read sacred literature or secular moralism for edification, but there is no reason why one could not read much else this way. For good or ill, one can read almost anything with a view to a moral vision or ideal to be adopted. Although we might hope that one who looks for moral guidance will find it somewhere worth looking, not all edifying reading is morally salutary; indeed, much of it is likely to corrupt rather than improve the reader's soul. In either case, the goal of edifying reading is neither to understand the text on its terms nor to master what is written for some particular purpose, but to appropriate and live what is written.

The fourth is recreative reading. This reading does not aim at learning at all, not basic learning, not expert learning, and not moral learning. It aims rather at diversion – diversion from the burdens of everyday life, from the stresses of work, and even from the effort of learning. Although any distraction might be restful, the best recreation will nonetheless be uplifting. Sertillanges' advice is sound: "have the intelligence to read, among the books that are equally effective in resting your mind, what will also be useful otherwise, helping you to develop your personality, to adorn your mind, to be a man."[21] Diversion is useful, if it is temporary and actually does provide rest from something difficult and worthwhile, but it is better if it is also good.

Which of these types of reading might be fitting for university education? Otherwise put, if education is a reading of sorts, which model of reading can provide a plausible goal for the university? Should we form the intellect, produce masters, edify, or entertain?

I wish that entertainment could be passed over without comment, but I have heard the horrifying expression "edutainment" too many times not to address it. Surely, learning can be, even should be, enjoyable. If we can trust Aristotle that every completed activity produces pleasure,[22] then it should be true that learning produces pleasure. If we can trust Aristotle that higher activities produce higher pleasures,[23] and that the

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[20] Sertillanges, *the Intellectual Life*, p. 154.

[21] Sertillanges, *the Intellectual Life*, pp. 156-157.

[22] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Joe Sachs (Newburyport: Focus Publishing, 2002), 10.4, 1174a 13-1175a 22.

[23] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 10.4, 1175b 23-1176a 29.

study of universal things is the highest human activity,[24] then the study that results in universal knowledge will be more than pleasing; it will be preeminently pleasurable.[25] Moreover, teaching and learning can be playful. There is nothing wrong with introducing a little levity in a class either to make some difficult topic less intimidating or simply to allow for a pause between the serious and the more serious, but to admit that learning is pleasing and can be playful is not to treat education as a protracted diversion. Indeed, if university education is a diversion, poor sleep-deprived undergraduates cramming for final exams would prove it to be among the worst diversions imaginable. To conceive of and deliver schooling as if it is a lengthy game with no higher purpose than the play itself is to degrade schooling and the humans involved in it altogether.

Edification is another matter. If the university could make students good, who would not come to the defense of moral cultivation? Unfortunately, I do not think that universities or its professors can accomplish this lofty and noble goal. Consider Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. This book will actually make students better humans on two conditions: first, that they accept and assimilate its teachings; second, that its teachings are actually correct. It should be clear enough that the first condition can be neither guaranteed nor tested for during an academic semester. We might all hope that encounters with great moral works can make us better people, but such hope seems ill-suited to the narrow strictures of formal university education. Just as "one swallow does not make a Spring,"[26] one semester – or less – spent studying Aristotle will not make one virtuous. About the second condition, we must recognize that the time during which we could expect a typical university to be governed by a singular moral vision has long passed – for good or ill.[27] Without a singular moral vision, it is impossible for any university as a whole to actually edify each one of its students. Besides, I am not quite sure how topics that have little or nothing to do with moral issues could be morally edifying at all. Either mathematics, for instance, belong in the university, in which case the university's goal is not edification, or mathematics do not belong in the university, in which case university

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[24] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 10.7-8, 1177a 11-1179a 32.

[25] No contemporary philosopher has done better than James Schall in stressing and defending the pleasures of learning and the playfulness of study, especially philosophical study. See for instance James Schall, *Another Sort of Learning* (San Fransico: Ignatius Press, 1988), *the Life of the Mind* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2006) and *on the Unseriousness of Human Affairs* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2012).

[26] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.7, 1098a 18.

[27] Unless secular universities are governed by a hidden dogma, maybe something like secular relativism or radical pluralism, most universities simply cannot adhere to a singular moral vision. Moreover, as relativistic as university programs and courses can be, it would be an exaggeration to conclude that universities are just relativistic; after all, the non- and anti-relativists have not all been fired yet – thankfully.

education has always been rather wide of the mark. The clear thinking that results from the study of maths may sharpen a student's moral thinking, but the goal of maths is the apprehension of mathematical things, not the refinement of one's capacity to think clearly about moral problems.[28] The former can be tested in a class and may be expected from students completing a course of study; the latter cannot be. Finally, edification demands too much from university teachers. Moral wisdom is too rare to expect that we could all have it, as if a doctoral degree were a necessary and sufficient condition of moral rectitude. If, as Aristotle puts it, moral wisdom is "a truth-disclosing active condition involving reason that governs action, concerned with what is good and bad for a human being,"[29] then it is indeed unlikely to be prevalent anywhere, including – perhaps especially – in a university.

Mastery at first blush seems more promising, but it presumes too much as well. Universities, at least undergraduate universities, simply cannot make masters, and would do well to not presume to do so. I fear that we sometimes do treat the undergraduate experience as more than initiation into a discipline and into the life of the mind; we often treat it as professional apprenticeship, as if the goal is to make philosophers, sociologists, historians, physicists, and economists. Mastery cannot be the goal of undergraduate education because not every student can become a master, and not every student who can become a master wills to be one. Mastery comes later, if at all. Graduate school is a different matter, for which mastery seems a much more likely goal. Surely newly minted PhDs are masters of a sort, whose research involved accidental reading. But even if the goal of graduate school is mastery, the aim of a minority of students cannot be the goal of the whole. The university as a whole cannot aim at mastery just because graduate education might. It is, however, not clear that graduate research actually does result in mastery. A successful dissertation defense, laudable as it is, does not make one a genuine master. Some expertise is of course involved insofar as the student comes to know this or that particular subject deeply, but the result is narrow, particular, and provisional expertise, not mastery. The doctoral student may become a master, but not by virtue of defending a dissertation. If university education does not result in masters, even at the graduate level, then mastery simply cannot be its goal.

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[28] Plato recognized this. According to Socrates in Book 7 of the *Republic*, the study of mathematics, when students and teachers are unconcerned with practical application, is a necessary precursor to the apprehension of the Good, but is on its own insufficient for moral improvement. Without subsequent dialectical study of moral categories, mathematical thinking will serve no ultimate moral or theological end. See Plato, *Republic*, translated by Joe Sachs (Newburyport: Focus Publishing, 2007), 522c-541b.

[29] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 6.5, 1140b 4-5.

This leaves us with formation, and it is here that I think we find the most plausible, modest, and realizable goal for the university: to form minds, not once and for all, but to prepare them for further learning and study by learning what is true in our disciplines, by thinking with, not against, the great thinkers of the past and present, by coming to know that the human mind can know universal things, and by coming to know at least some of those universal things. In effect, I suggest we consider university education as an intellectual formation for the sake of more formation, continued formation. The goal is to learn some of what learned people have learned, and to know some of what knowledgeable people know. This may eventually lead to mastery or edification, but the eventual is out of the university's hands. As Plato's Socrates does in Book 7 of the *Republic*, we might conceive of education as a turning of the soul towards the truth. Accordingly, the goal is not to appropriate the truth once and for all, but to glimpse it and prepare oneself to approach it.[30]

In lieu of a conclusion, let me end by asking some, not altogether un-rhetorical, questions.

Do we slip into entertainment and thus away from formation when we design courses in order to appeal to students and increase enrollment numbers, when we offer courses that will be attractive rather than central to our disciplines, when we pander to students' preferences, when we design lessons that will be fun rather than substantive, or use games, novel technologies, and other ploys to govern rather than supplement our teaching?

Do we slip into moralism when we refuse to teach classes or texts that do not fit with our own moral or ideological perspective, when we refuse Marx entry because we think communism is vile, or Mill because liberalism is just ideology, or Aristotle because he was sexist, or Aquinas because they did not know anything in those terrible dark ages, or Pieper because he was Catholic, or Nietzsche because of his moustache? Conversely, do we slip into the same when we only teach Marx because communism is true, or Mill because liberalism ends history, or Nietzsche because of his moustache?[31]

Do we slip into the presumption to mastery when we design assignments that conform rigidly to the conventions of our disciplines as professions, or when we conduct research on the narrowest topics and teach students those same topics at the expense of general knowledge,

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[30] Plato, *Republic*, 514a-518e.
[31] I will leave Aristotle, Aquinas, and Pieper out of this second question, not only because their writings might be mostly correct, but because their books are some of the best objects for formative reading. A university that devoted significant time to the study of their texts would likely do very well. Unfortunately, with the exception of Aristotle's brief appearances in ethics, metaphysics and ancient philosophy courses, it is rare for students to meet these great thinkers, let alone on their own terms.

or when we focus on disputation and cultivating cleverness rather than on principles of clear thinking?

If the university should be a formative site, then what is needed of us all is a heavy dose of humility. Universities *cannot* make saints or masters; they *should not* make or indulge pacified consumers of play. As such, the faculty and administrators of universities should not presume or aspire to do so. Teachers should avoid being little public men and women, and should not try to train students to be the same. Let us at the very least not lead them into arrogant pride. Instead, we would do well to pay heed to Father Sertillanges:

> When one's mind is in process of formation and one has almost everything to learn, the hour has not come for individual initiative. Whether one is at the earlier stage, acquiring all-round culture, or taking up a new branch of study, a problem hitherto neglected, the authors consulted for this purpose must be believed rather than criticized, and followed in their own line of thought rather than used according to the reader's views. To launch out into action too soon interferes with the process of acquisition; it is wise at first to be docile. "You must believe your master," says St. Thomas, repeating Aristotle. He himself did this and found it to his advantage.[32]

If this approach to learning was good enough for St. Thomas and Aristotle, it is surely good enough for us today.

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[32] Sertillanges, *the Intellectual Life*, pp. 152-153.