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SPECIAL LECTURE

The idea of a university†

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The idea of a university

The title of this piece is a direct borrowing from John Henry Newman – later Cardinal Newman – perhaps best known for his connection with the Oxford Movement (1833-41), and whose *Idea of a University* was written in 1852, the year after he became Rector of the newly-founded Catholic University of Ireland. The discourses were later published, in 1859.

In his 6th Discourse, Newman writes:

> … it is, I believe, … the business of a University to make this intellectual culture its direct scope, or to employ itself in the education of the intellect, – … I say, a University, taken in its bare idea … has this object and this mission; it contemplates neither moral impression nor mechanical production; it professes to exercise the mind neither in art nor in duty; its function is intellectual culture; here it may leave its scholars, and it has done its work when it has done as much as this. It educates the intellect to reason well in all matters, to reach out towards truth, and to grasp it.
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> (Newman, 1999, p. 114)

If, at first glance, there appears to be something almost irresistibly seductive about this vision of the University, it derives from two things, the first being Newman's prose, and the second its inherent idealism. Newman's writing persuades through the intricacies of its rhetorical architecture, its structural pairings (e.g. moral impression/mechanical production; art/duty) which he builds up only to sweep away, leaving behind in its place the forceful simplicity of 'its function is intellectual culture', the sentence coming to a rest on that final judgment 'here it may leave its scholars, and it has done its work when it has done as much as this.' And the reader or hearer is momentarily charmed both by the purity and by the gravitas of the educational vision that is evoked by that triad of terms: 'intellect', 'reason', and – most powerful of all – 'truth'.

Yet, while the idea of the university as a place dedicated to the cultivation of the intellect and the grasping of 'truth' continues to exert a powerful hold upon the imagination, we would probably, today, in the modern university, experience a modicum of uneasiness with regard to certain of the assumptions with which Newman, in the middle of the nineteenth century, appears to have been working. The very idealism that makes Newman's vision attractive is also the first thing likely to bring it under fire: is the cultivation of the intellect indeed the ultimate *telos* or purpose of the university, a sufficient justification for its existence?

Does a university have no practical function at all, no further end? How does one square Newman's kind of idealism with the pragmatism of the view held by many students: that the point of a university education is the acquisition of a degree whose function is to endorse the student as 'fit for purpose', that is, able to do a job and to earn a salary?

Even if the implicit schizophrenia of the thing is not always uppermost in our consciousness, we who teach in the university will often feel the strain of marrying the two discourses, finding the plebeian energy of 'job' and 'salary' jostling uncomfortably against the patrician *hauteur* of 'intellect', 'reason' and 'truth'. Two further, and separate, dichotomies are foregrounded by another of Newman's observations to the effect that the university

> … is a place of *teaching* universal *knowledge*. This implies that its object is, on the one hand, intellectual, not moral; and, on the other, that it is the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than the advancement.
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> (Newman, 1999, p. xvii)

Here, Newman is saying, and saying quite unambiguously, that the university exists for the purposes of teaching and not research, which is not a view that any university would, nowadays, subscribe to. He is also stating that the remit of those teaching in the university is the sharpening of the scholar's mind, but not the shaping of the scholar's morals.

It may be possible, however, that all three of the dichotomies outlined above are false, and that a truer expression of the relation between each of these pairs: teaching and research, idealism and pragmatism, mind and morals, is that they are symbiotic, mutually-sustaining, rather than divergent or antagonistic. Let us consider them further. Newman's view of the teaching/ research divide is that

> To discover and to teach are distinct functions; they are also distinct gifts, and are not commonly found united in the same person. He, too, who spends his day in dispensing his existing knowledge to all comers is unlikely to have either leisure or energy to acquire new. The common sense of mankind has associated the search after truth [he means research] with seclusion and quiet. The greatest thinkers have been too intent on their subject to admit of interruption; they have been men of absent minds and idiosyncratic habits, and have, more or less, shunned the lecture room and the public school
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> (Newman, 1999, p. vi)

I suspect many of us in the university might have a secret sympathy with Newman's portrayal both of the teacher and of the researcher. There is some truth in the view that after a long day of writing and giving lectures, tutorials, supervisions and student consultations in which one dispenses knowledge, advice, books, food, tissues, cough sweets, etc., one is simply too exhausted for anything else. And we, probably, all of us know, in our own departments, someone, or many someones, who fit the second sketch: the researcher for whom teaching is an interruption, an irritating blip, a necessary evil. Tolkien was probably a variant of this latter type. The author Diana Wynne Jones, who was lectured to in philology at Oxford by Tolkien, once noted in an interview:

> I went to his public lectures. They were absolutely appalling. In those days a lecturer could be paid for his entire course even if he lost his audience, provided he turned up for the first lecture. I think that Tolkien made quite a cynical effort to get rid of us so he could go home and finish writing *The Lord of the Rings*. … He gave his lectures in a very very small room and didn't address us, his audience, at all. In fact he looked the other way, with his face almost squashed up against the blackboard. He spoke in a mutter. His mind was on finishing *The Lord of the Rings*, and he was really musing to himself about the nature of narrative.
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> (Marcus, 2006, p. 85)

But even while it is probably true that there are those who to whom teaching comes more naturally than research, and those who research more naturally than they teach, it is, I think, nonetheless true that the two areas are not, in fact, disjunct. Research can often provide the materials of teaching and give students contact with cutting-edge ideas and this tends to generate an intellectual excitement that can often in turn stimulate new research. And, importantly, as pointed out by Marsh and Hattie in a 2002 article, 'Active researchers are more effective at instilling an actively critical approach [in their students] to understanding complex research findings rather a passive acceptance of facts.' (p. 604).

Nor do all the benefits run one way; the relationship is dialectical and dynamic: teaching, which requires us to clarify concepts, causal relationships, etc. for the students, can often result in a sharpening or clarifying of ideas for oneself. Students' questions and ideas often excite and stimulate fresh thought for the teacher, which may, in time give shape to new research. The relationship therefore, is a symbiotic and synergising one. Newman's imagined researcher/thinker, living a cloistered life of the mind while shunning the public school or lecture hall and breathing only the rarefied air of the study or library, would probably, after a time, find that mind stagnating.

More interesting than the research/teaching divide, however, is the question, raised earlier, of whether the university exists for the purposes of honing the intellect or conferring a degree upon the student, and whether or not it is possible to reconcile the idealist and pragmatist views of the matter. A university's vision is, at least in theory, emblematised by its motto, and what is intriguing is how many universities, as indexed by their mottos, proclaim themselves to be closer in spirit to Newman's idealistic university with its affirmation of 'intellect, reason and truth' than any more pragmatic vision.

- Harvard, for example, stands by *Veritas* – Truth;
- Yale *Lux et Veritas* – Light and Truth;
- the University of Southern Queensland by *Per Studia Mens Nova* – By Study the Mind is Renewed;
- the University of Chicago blazons *Crescat Scientia Vita Excolatur* – Let Knowledge Grow from More to More; and so be Human Life Enriched;

I've so far taken a (admittedly strategically) random sampling of universities, and if one looks at a list of universities and their mottoes, what may be found is that a surprisingly large proportion of world universities, even outside Europe where it might have been expected, give public expression to their aspirations in Latin. This is of course in large part an accident of history – the early European universities were founded at a time when Latin was the common linguistic currency, used both by church and scholars. And in the case of that which is accepted as constituting the world's oldest continuously-operating university – I am referring to the University of Bologna, founded in 1088 – the Latin would have had an extra point: the University was founded by scholars from various nations and was thus a microcosm of the universe, (hence 'university'). These scholars (and here, I'm quoting from a work in progress by Dr. Alistair Chew) 'got together and used their collective bargaining power to make contracts with professors (often itinerant) to provide an education which the civil structure could not provide.' The point, then, about Latin, is that it would have provided a *lingua franca* for all these scholars from different parts of the world in which to communicate.

(The lecturer in the inset picture dating from the C14th is generally understood to be Henry of Germany, though I have to say the style of the turban and beard prompts me to think rather of Arabic than of European illuminati.) Later universities, both European and global,

often incline to Latin for a reason I shall mention shortly, and because, until relatively recently, historically speaking, Latin was accepted as the language associated with learning and authority, with law, medicine, the church; until 1960 both Oxford and Cambridge had Latin as a requirement of university undergraduate admission. (Yale, incidentally, went one better in the C18th when, for a time, all freshmen were required to study Hebrew.)

What is interesting about university mottos and their formulation in Latin, even in the case of relatively modern universities, is what this says at some level about inspiration and aspiration – which brings us back to the issue of idealistic vision. The Latin, as I said a moment ago, is mostly historical accident. But the fact that it continues to be utilised for the purposes of the university motto, long past the time that Latin would have been the language of standard academic use, indicates something about the sociology of universities. It suggests that there is an unspoken perception about the way that universities 'ought to' formulate and present themselves, a code which exists, though that code can on occasion be broken in order to make a point perhaps felt to be of greater ideological importance, as when, for example, at least six out of the nine Welsh universities opt for Welsh mottoes in order to make a nationalist or political point.

But the larger point involving the use of Latin is not merely that the university signals its acknowledgement of, and acquiescence to, some 'code', and, by implication, some common vision, but that at some level it also articulates a yearning or nostalgia for the past, for historical groundedness and continuity and also for something beyond the actual, beyond the practical – something *more*. Nostalgia today is often seen as a symptom of a weak and dangerous sentimentalism, but it is not in that sense that it is meant here. It is not necessarily regressive or enervated or a hindrance to progress; rather, I might here quote from Wordsworth who notes that the enquiries we make 'concerning the *whence*, do necessarily include correspondent habits of interrogation concerning the *whither*. Origins and tendency are notions inseparably co-relative.' (Wordsworth, 1988, p. 324) In other words, if you want to know where you're going, you also need to have a sense of where you came from; you need at least two points before you can plot and calculate a trajectory.

But Latin, as something not strictly needed for simple functionality, but as symbolic of that something *more*, that which is surplus to requirements, also, in its use, subtly signals a commitment to that which lies beyond the boundaries of the functional and the pragmatic. Not only is Latin a language that we appear to be able to be less self-conscious and diffident in when invoking the ideal, the ethical and the humanistic, but its use further affirms the belief that education – and therefore university education – looks beyond and desires *more* than the inculcation of useful knowledge and the equipping of the student for job market.

When sampling the mottoes of universities round the world I was inspired by all the commitments to truth, to knowledge, to wisdom, but found myself somehow most moved by that of the University of Leicester which states simply: *Ut Vitam Habeant*: That They May Have Life. Two terms are seemingly absent in this motto but in fact are the powerful and invisible ground upon which the motto works. There is a space before 'that they may have life' that must be filled in for the sentence fragment to make sense. That silent and implied term is 'the university'. The university – *this university* – exists in order that 'they' – the students – might 'have life'. That is its *telos*. But what is *also* unspoken is both what the university does that grants 'life', and what it is that is meant by 'life' here. What is implied, as I understand it, is that that which the university does is to provide the education without which we cannot be said to 'live' in any meaningful sense of the word. Education is therefore transfigured from a mere means to a practical end, into something of incalculable – and non-calculable – existential worth.

The university therefore has to be sustained by a vision that transcends the purely pragmatic. And on this point, we may quote Amartya Sen. Sen writes:

> If education makes a person more efficient in commodity production, then this is clearly an enhancement of human capital. This can add to the value of production in the economy and also to the income of the person who has been educated. But even with the same level of income, a person may benefit from education – in reading, communicating, arguing, in being able to choose in a more informed way, in being taken more seriously by others and so on. The benefits of education, thus, exceed its role as human capital in commodity production. The broader human-capability perspective would note – and value – these additional roles as well.
>
> (Sen, 2000, p. 293-294)

Sen draws on terms like 'capital', 'commodity' and 'capability', the first two deriving from a vocabulary usually associated with the hard-headed world of corporate thinking and pragmatic, real-world concerns, the world from which terms like 'job' and 'degree' emanate. Yet, with the introduction of 'capability' Sen rises above the tangible world of economic and social progress towards the less tangible philosophical stratosphere in which one of his key terms, 'freedom', takes flight. My point is not however, merely that Sen's thinking affirms the idealist and the visionary alongside the practical; his thinking, which has gone into the shaping of the HDI (Human Development Index) forces a recognition that the development and developedness of a society is marked by more than its GDP, GNP, etc., and the mark of the more developed society is the shift in its vision from 'capital' to 'capability'.

All this perhaps serves to offer some defence of the necessary place of the ideal in the composition of the university, but my earlier claim was not that the ideal was *more* important than pragmatic concerns but that the perceived dichotomy between ideal and pragmatic which Newman's views cause us to contemplate might in fact be a false one. There are, perhaps, a few ways of addressing this apparent dichotomy. One is to see if it can be rethought as a dialectic, as with the teaching-research dyad earlier discussed, perhaps treating the fissure as a *productive* fissure, and here, I am indebted to one of my second-year students, who, when asked what he thought of the difficulties of marrying the ideal and the pragmatic in the shaping of a modern university ethos responded:

> Both registers need to exist - the fantasy of idealism in some ways fuels the very pragmatism of social reality. It is that impossible gap that drives the economy of desire, and the impulse towards progress.
>
> (Z. Y. Lim, personal communication, May 11, 2014)

What he means is that yearning is born in the gap between the ideal and the real, serving as a stimulus to us to reach past the real, or actual, towards the 'something more', a superior and enriched reality to what is currently enjoyed, the ideal, and aspiration, therefore being, as he says, 'vital in shaping our social reality'. That some universities not only affirm the possibility of a collusion rather than a collision between the ideal and the pragmatic is attested to, I think, in the motto of MIT: *Mens et Manus*,

> 'Mind and Hands', in which two instances of dualism (body and mind, thinking and doing) are rejected in favour of a conjoined and holistic singularity. And if we allow 'mind' to stand symbolically for the discourse of the ideal and 'hands' to stand for the discourse of the real, or the pragmatic, we may see here expressed that integratedness of ethos, which is, in fact central to my own understanding or vision of that which should shape a university and which also informs my own teaching philosophy.

This brings me then to the last dichotomy and Newman's assertion that the proper focus of the university is the honing of the intellect, and not moral impression. It is the mind, in other words, and not the values or the character of the scholar that Newman thinks the university should be concerned with. My disagreement with Newman is sourced in the belief that one cannot partition the student in this way, and that in teaching, the idea of 'integrity' must ground all else. When speaking of the 'integrity' of the student I am not invoking, directly or solely, the moral/ethical dimension of the word, although I take this ethical dimension to be the necessary predicate of all teaching, all proper human relating. I am

meaning that when one teaches, one teaches to the whole, or integrated, person. When we train the mind, we also, at some level, train the character, and vice versa. And the training up of student competence extends beyond the limits of any given discipline and also beyond the limits of undergraduate life. Everything marches together. What we may manage to teach the student of care, precision and meticulousness, for example, in matters of citation, does not only benefit his ability to craft a bibliography, but also shapes his ability to think precisely and is a general attitude that will inform all else that he does. A sharpening of the student to engage with the difficulty of concept or the difficulty of text is also a shaping of his character: he is being trained not to be afraid, to be intelligent in his confrontation of the difficult, to be undamaged by failure, and to have the character to stick things out. If a motto existed wherewith to express what I should like their time at the university to teach the students, it would be simply: 'Guts and persistence', or, more forcefully: 'that they may endure'.

Despite Newman's dream of a university affirming and held firmly up by the pure pillars of intellect, reason and truth, the *Idea of a University* in the end assents to the view that the university has a further *telos* than the pure culturing of the mind. The university, as Professor Ernest Chew once said, 'is both universe and city – a dispassionate teeming mass of random knowledge, claims to knowledge, and lacunae or voids in knowledge, but also a place where civility (*civitas*, the 'ethos' of cityhood) reigns in formal discourse and structures supporting that discourse.' (Ernest Chew, personal communication, May 9, 2014) And as that which is both universe and city, then, the university is that which prepares the student for, as Newman finally recognised, the larger universe outside, saying

> If then a practical end must be assigned to a University course, I say it is that it is training good members of society. Its art is the art of social life, and its end is fitness for the world.
>
> (Newman, 1999, p. 160)

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