Newman on Education

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Like much of the clotted Victorian prose in *The Idea of a University*, Discourse 5 is dense. Newman's core argument is that knowledge is only properly transformed into science or philosophy when it is informed by our rational faculty (reason). Knowledge acquired through the process of education can certainly exert palpable, beneficial personal effects on our lives, but education should also be about acquiring knowledge for its own sweet sake. Newman argues that it is reason as our specifically human quality that sets us aside in the natural world because we are capable of drawing logical conclusions based on our capacity to reflect on our sensory perceptions. Newman can then draw a crucial line between education and instruction – instruction teaches us how to do something, but education teaches us why we might want to do – or not to do – that something.

Discourse 7 offers Newman's thoughts about 'useful' [utilitarian] education. For Newman, education means training the intellect in pursuit of truth. Truth cannot be grasped quickly at one glance: it has to be arrived at carefully through a painstaking incremental process, this process has to be learnt, and the university is an engaged community of teachers and learners, all engaged in the pursuit of truth [But like 'the pursuit of happiness' that Jefferson advocated, Newman inserts a melancholy undertow that education is the 'pursuit' rather than the destination itself, difficult if not impossible to arrive at in our 'vale of tears']. Education is not the mere piecemeal accumulation of knowledge, so it can never be 'measured' by the number of books read, the hours spent in lecture rooms or labs, the grades obtained, the exams passed, the qualifications credentialled. Education is the term that Newman applies to this process of training the intellect, not for a specific profession, but for its own sake. Newman challenges the idea that the justification of an expensive university education (all those over-paid, entiled and unproductive professors!) is that it produces 'added value' for its consumers – tangible results in the form of employable graduates – engineers, doctors, accountants….

> This process of training, by which the intellect, instead of being formed or sacrificed to some particular or accidental purpose, some specific trade or profession, or study or science, is disciplined for its own sake, for the perception of its own proper

> object, and for its own highest culture, is called Liberal Education; and though there is no one in whom it is carried as far as is conceivable, or whose intellect would be a pattern of what intellects should be made, yet there is scarcely any one but may gain an idea of what real training is, and at least look towards it, and make its true scope and result, not something else, his standard of excellence; {153} and numbers there are who may submit themselves to it, and secure it to themselves in good measure. And to set forth the right standard, and to train according to it, and to help forward all students towards it according to their various capacities, this I conceive to be the business of a University.
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> Now this is what some great men are very slow to allow; they insist that Education should be confined to some particular and narrow end, and should issue in some definite work, which can be weighed and measured. They argue as if every thing, as well as every person, had its price; and that where there has been a great outlay, they have a right to expect a return in kind. This they call making education and instruction 'useful', and 'utility' becomes their watchword. With a fundamental principle of this nature, they very naturally go on to ask, what there is to show for the expense of a university; what is the real worth in the market of the article called 'a liberal education', on the supposition that it does not teach us definitely how to advance our manufactures, or to improve our lands, or to better our civil economy; or again, if it does not at once make this man a lawyer, that an engineer, and that a surgeon; or at least if it does not lead to discoveries in chemistry, astronomy, geology, magnetism, and science of every kind.

For Newman, the appropriate measure of the utility of education is not economic benefit, but an overall increase in social goodness, the cultivation of our intellects will spread goodness [moral values] through the communities in which we live and move and have our being (Dante). 'Though the useful is not always good, the good is always useful'. Newman argued forcefully against the view that increasing peoples' knowledge (or having new resources or libraries or website), will automatically make a person or society **morally** better.

> Knowledge is one thing, virtue is another; good sense is not conscience, refinement is not humility, nor is largeness and justness of view faith. Philosophy, however enlightened, however profound, gives no command over the passions, no influential

> motives, no vivifying principles. Liberal Education makes not the Christian, not the Catholic, but the gentleman. . . . Quarry the granite rock with razors, or moor the vessel with a thread of silk; then may you hope with such keen and delicate instruments as human knowledge and human reason to contend against those giants, the passion and the pride of man (Discourse 5:9).

So although the university imparts particular skills, its proper ambition must always remain to build this intellectual capacity in its students – all its students, no matter what discipline they are pursuing. For that reason, the lectures of a professor of law are different from those of a practicing lawyer – s/he must be able to situate law in the context of whole knowledge rather than a carefully chosen part of it. Universities doesn't necessarily produces geniuses (although some may languish/flourish unrecognised there, usually on the margins, not in the mainstream), nor should its only aim be to produce excellent practitioners of specific professions, who go on to earn incomes that justify the expense of their education: rather, the purpose of a university is to produce graduates who will contribute positively to society.

> A person may hear a thousand lectures, and read a thousand volumes, and be at the end of the process very much where he was, as regards knowledge. Something more than merely admitting it in a negative way into the mind is necessary, if it is to remain there. It must not be passively received, but actually and actively entered into, embraced, mastered. The mind must go half-way to meet what comes to it from without [outside].[1]

> A cultivated intellect, because it is a good in itself, brings with it a power and a grace to every work and occupation which it undertakes, and enables us to be more useful, and to a greater number. There is a duty we owe to human society as such, to the state to which we belong, to the sphere in which we move, to the individuals towards whom we are variously related, and whom we successively encounter in life; and that philosophical or liberal education, as I have called it, which is the proper function of a University, if it refuses the foremost place to professional interests, does but postpone them to the formation of the citizen, and, while it subserves the larger interests of philanthropy,

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[1] *Discipline of the Mind* (1858)

prepares also for the successful prosecution of those merely personal objects, which at first sight it seems to disparage.

Newman then delivers (via Lord Shaftesbury) his brilliant (if gender-bound) peon of praise to the ideal gentleman: 'a person who knows how to find himself in every situation, be serious or jovial, accommodate himself to others, put the good of others before his own, who influence them for the wider good. He is equally happy either immersed in the busy world or in solitude, he is a pleasant companion and reliable friend; in short, this is the ideal person that a university education should mould'. But we should caution that this much-admired passage offers, in the end, a somewhat critical portrait of a smooth, smart, refined, cultivated and polite individual, a secular and worldly ideal – the finest product of what Newman calls 'the Religion of Philosophy', 'the Religion of Reason', or 'the Religion of Civilization'.

> But, if we will make light of what is deepest within us, nothing is left but to pay homage to what is more upon the surface. To *seem* becomes to *be*; what looks fair will be good, what causes offence will be evil; virtue will be what pleases, vice what pains. As well may we measure virtue by utility as by such a rule. At this day the 'gentleman' is the creation, not of Christianity, but of civilization. But the reason is obvious. The world is content with setting right the surface of things; the Church aims at regenerating the very depths of the heart.
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> Today I have confined myself to saying that that training of the intellect, which is best for the individual himself, best enables him to discharge his duties to society. The Philosopher, indeed, and the man of the world differ in their very notion, but the methods, by which they are respectively formed, are pretty much the same. The philosopher has the same command of matters of thought, which the true citizen and gentleman has of matters of business and conduct. If then a practical end must be assigned to a university course, I say it is that of training good members of society. Its art is the art of social life, and its end is fitness for the world. It neither confines its views to particular professions on the one hand, nor creates heroes or inspires genius on the other. Works indeed of genius fall under no art; heroic minds come under no rule; a university is not a birthplace of poets or of immortal authors, of founders of schools, leaders of colonies, or conquerors of nations. It does not promise a generation of

Aristotles or Newtons, of Napoleons or Washingtons, of Raphaels or Shakespeares, though such miracles of nature it has before now contained within its precincts. Nor is it content on the other hand with forming the critic or the experimentalist, the economist or the engineer, though such too it includes within its scope.

But a university training is the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end; it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to {178} popular aspiration, at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, at facilitating the exercise of political power, and refining the intercourse of private life. It is the education which gives a man a clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them. It teaches him to see things as they are, to go right to the point, to disentangle a skein of thought, to detect what is sophistical, and to discard what is irrelevant. It prepares him to fill any post with credit, and to master any subject with facility. It shows him how to accommodate himself to others, how to throw himself into their state of mind, how to bring before them his own, how to influence them, how to come to an understanding with them, how to bear with them. He is at home in any society, he has common ground with every class; he knows when to speak and when to be silent; he is able to converse, he is able to listen; he can ask a question pertinently, and gain a lesson seasonably, when he has nothing to impart himself; he is ever ready, yet never in the way; he is a pleasant companion, and a comrade you can depend upon; he knows when to be serious and when to trifle, and he has a sure tact which enables him to trifle with gracefulness and to be serious with effect. He has the repose of a mind which lives in itself, while it lives in the world, and which has resources for its happiness at home when it cannot go abroad. He has a gift which serves him in public, and supports him in retirement, without which good fortune is but vulgar, and with which failure and disappointment have a charm. The art which tends to make a man all this, is in the object which it pursues as useful as the art of wealth or the art of health, though it is less susceptible of method, and less tangible, less certain, less complete in its result.[2]

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[2] Discourse 7: Knowledge viewed in relation to Professional Skill.

The *Idea of a University* continues the definition of ideal graduates by isolating a quality relevant to our angry shouty age of public discourse: a person who never knowingly inflicts pain. For Newman, their presence is like a welcoming fire and a comfortable chair, because they make everyone around them feel comfortable. They avoid confrontational unpleasantness and seek to set everybody in their company at ease. They are not egotistical and seldom speak too much about themselves. It is so appealing to imagine a person who even when engaged in a discussion is considerate of the other side's point of view. We might ask ourselves if genuine progress can be achieved if you are always primed to ensure that you don't bruise anybody's emotions? Does that mean that we just gloss past difficult issues and conceal what we really think behind a veneer of politeness? Or even worse, does it mean that we do not share any of our thoughts beyond banal pleasantries unless we know that we are safely ensconced in the presence of those who think like 'us'?
In our world of 'us' versus 'them', the challenge for all of 'us' is to make room for the 'they' in an expanded and more generous version of 'us.

Knowledge is holistic, but the various disciplines must not claim to be dogmatic for they supplement each other; they each offer partial pictures. For Newman, if God is the source of the natural and social worlds, then the study of theology cannot be excluded. And we must also consider how it is that we 'know' what we 'know' or think that we 'know: hence the study of Philosopy. Newman speaks of the cultivation of 'a philosophical habit of mind' as the proper goal of liberal education. By 'Philosophy', he means an enlarged and commanding overview of all the disciplines and of the interrelations of their parts as aspects of that whole, a knowledge of principles and their relations, rather than merely a knowledge of 'facts'. Philosophy, then, in his sense, is 'the science of sciences'. Newman then argues that 'such a philosophical contemplation of the field of Knowledge as a whole, leading, as it did, to an understanding of its separate departments, and an appreciation of them respectively, might in consequence be rightly called an illumination; also, it was rightly called an enlargement of mind'.

One might extrapolate then from Newman that students should encounter more than one discipline, and that that encounter should be essential to the intellectual formation of every student who enters a university. University education should consider the relationships among the disciplines, encouraging students to contemplate the

parallels and connections that make all knowledge a unity. Each discipline presents an aspect of the whole. Newman concludes that each discipline is an 'abstraction' from the whole, even the science of theology (only religion offers the whole vision).

Newman sought to deepen the agenda of our searching, and to make sure that we pose the appropriate questions rather than to seek glib cookie-cuttered answers. A crucial question for Newman as for us was how faith can retain its credibility in an age dominated by science. He challenged us not to flinch from that tough question but to seek answers by listening to an inner voice in our conscience and heart. Like his Danish contemporary Søren Kierkegaard, Newman practised and promoted an intensely interior spirituality that finds God not – in enlightenment fashion – in the encounter with the exterior world but dwelling within us in the depths of our selves. After Darwin, the material world was a less welcoming place for believers, as *Origins of Species* (1857) opened a rift between faith and reason. Newman was not against evolution as such and he emained receptive towards until his *Descent of Man* (1871). Newman's superb treatment of the relations (and oppositions) of faith and reason can be found in his *Oxford University Sermons*. Newman countered Darwin by arguing that 'man is *not* a reasoning animal; he is a seeing, feeling, contemplating, acting animal... It is the concrete being that reasons'. For Newman, the imagination retains primacy in matters of faith and the 'leap of faith – the assent to the presence of God – requires courage. It also requres intellect: Newman calls faith 'the reasoning of the religious mind'.
Liberal arts education cultivate a particular type of student: the person with a broadly formed intellect. This educational tradition is not focused on practical learning or indeed on religious instruction. Rather, its ambition must remain to foster a particular orientation and approach to knowledge, a blend of faith and reason, and a desire to elevate the wider good of society through one's life-long contribution.

> Science gives us the grounds or premises from which religious truths are to be inferred; but it does not set about inferring them, much less does it reach the inference;—that is not its province. It brings before us phenomena, and it leaves us, if we will, to call them works of design, wisdom, or benevolence; and further still, if we will, to proceed to confess an Intelligent Creator. We have to take its facts, and to give them a meaning, and to draw our own conclusions from them. First comes Knowledge, then a view, then reasoning, and then belief. This is why Science has so little of a religious tendency; deductions have no power of persuasion. The

heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination, by means of direct impressions, by the testimony of facts and events, by history, by description. Persons influence us, voices melt us, looks subdue us, deeds inflame us. Many a man will live and die upon a dogma: no man will be a martyr for a conclusion. A conclusion is but an opinion; it is not a thing which is, but which we are 'certain about'; and it has often been observed, that we never say we are certain without implying that we doubt. To say that a thing must be, is to admit that it may not be. No one, I say, will die for his own calculations; he dies for realities.[3]

The principle of real dignity in Knowledge, its worth, its desirableness, considered irrespectively of its results, is this germ within it of a scientific or a philosophical process. This is how it comes to be an end in itself; this is why it admits of being called Liberal. Not to know the relative disposition of things is the state of slaves or children; to have mapped out the Universe is the boast, or at least the ambition, of Philosophy. Moreover, such knowledge is not a mere extrinsic or accidental advantage, which is ours today and another's tomorrow, which may be got up from a book, and easily forgotten again, which we can command or communicate at our pleasure, which we can borrow for the occasion, carry about in our hand, and take into the market; it is an acquired illumination, it is a habit, a personal possession, and an inward endowment. And this is the reason, why it is more correct, as well as more usual, to speak of a University as a place of education, than of instruction, though, when knowledge is concerned, instruction would at first sight have seemed the more appropriate word. We are instructed, for instance, in manual exercises, in the fine and useful arts, in trades, and in ways of business; for these are methods, which have little or no effect upon the mind itself, are contained in rules committed to memory, to tradition, or to use, {114} and bear upon an end external to themselves.

Education is a higher word; it implies an action upon our mental nature, and the formation of a character; it is something individual and permanent, and is commonly spoken of in connexion with religion and virtue. When, then, we speak of the communication of Knowledge as being Education, we thereby really imply that that Knowledge is a state or condition of mind;

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[3] Tamworth Reading Room (1841).

> and since cultivation of mind is surely worth seeking for its own sake, we are thus brought once more to the conclusion, … that there is a Knowledge, which is desirable, though nothing come of it, as being of itself a treasure, and a sufficient remuneration of years of labour.

Newman never insisted that theology alone should rule the roost in a Catholic university. For him, pursuing any branch of knowledge for its own sake is inherently a religious activity, since all of nature is God's creation. He promoted an 'intercommunion' of all the principal academic disciplines for objective intellectual inquiry. A university fosters intellectual culture for its own sake, not as an instrument of church or state or wealth creation. Newman placed his university under the providential care of 'Sedes Sapientiae, Ora Pro Nobis' ('Seat of Wisdom, Pray for Us'), one of the titles from the Loreto Litany of the Blessed Virgin. Here he reinstates his distinction between S*cientia* (knowledge – knowing stuff) and *Sapientia* – (wisdom – knowing how to apply that knowledge in the proper way to lead a good life). And to do that, it needed an unwavering focus on a community of students, not importing a managerial or administrative approach to running a university as a business, which he argued would create 'an ice-bound, petrified, cast-iron university, and nothing else', as he felt that Oxford had become.[4] And Newman famously argued that if you swim around icebergs, you yourself get cold, so the idea of a warm supportive learning community remains his constant refrain.

In a long passage from a later work, Newman writes about the beauty of the classics (a passage hugely admired by James Joyce, who attended the Catholic University that Newman founded and who considered Newman's 'silver-veined ' prose to be the finest of his age). The magnificent passage describes how it takes time to appreciate classics: lines that people encountered in their education pop back to their minds when they are mature and suddenly they realise how piercing the perceptions of Virgil, Shakespeare and Dante, Dickinson, Whitman or Morrison, Joyce and Yeats and Heaney actually are. A great university in Newman's vision provides guidance and support to us through all our lives, not just for that small segment of our lives that we spend there.

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[4] *Sketches*, pp 71-2.