

The Research University in Crisis (Again): MacIntyre's *God, Philosophy, Universities*

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“The emptiness and triviality of so much of the rhetoric of official academia is a symptom of a much deeper disorder.”

—Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*¹

IN *God, Philosophy, Universities*, Alasdair MacIntyre offers both a critique of the research ideal in the modern university and a corrective in the form of a Catholic account of the unifying end of liberal education. Amid the many contemporary voices decrying this or that vice of the modern university, MacIntyre's book stands out, not so much for its critique, as for its attempt to articulate a set of founding philosophical principles that might inform our thinking about the university. This focus explains what might otherwise seem surprising in MacIntyre's book, namely, that it has so little to say explicitly about the university. It is primarily a book of philosophy and intellectual history. Implicit in MacIntyre's critique of the modern university is thus a critique of contemporary jeremiads against the university, which rarely, if ever, provide a philosophical account of the ends of human inquiry. To see the significance of MacIntyre's book, it might help to put it in conversation with the famous and hugely influential 1955 essay of John Tracy Ellis, “American Catholics and the Intellectual Life,” in which Ellis urges Catholic universities to embrace the research ideal.² Putting the two in

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 227.

² John Tracy Ellis, “American Catholics and the Intellectual Life,” *Thought* 30 (1955): 351–88.

conversation highlights, from a Catholic perspective, the most important questions about the research university. In light of that conversation, we will turn to MacIntyre's philosophical analysis of the university and to the surprising centerpiece of his Catholic account of higher learning: the recovery of the Thomistic understanding of soul and body.

I. The Tasks of the Catholic University: Ellis and MacIntyre

In his essay, Ellis, a highly regarded historian at the Catholic University of America at the time he wrote the essay, lamented the current state of Catholic higher education and admonished Catholics to raise standards and expectations.³ Alongside a plea for greater scholarly rigor in Catholic universities, Ellis urged Catholic parents to inculcate habits of reading in their children. Because his essay focused on research and castigated Catholics for their ghetto mentality, the piece is often seen as initiating the process of secularization whose effects we can witness at those Catholic universities that have most enthusiastically embraced the research ideal of the great secular schools.⁴ Indeed, the essay is sometimes envisioned as a first draft of the 1960s Land O' Lakes statement—the statement that initiated the separation of Catholic universities from ecclesiastical governance.⁵ But Ellis's essay is nothing of the sort. Aside from the fact that there is no juridical element in the various theses Ellis propounds, the essay strikes, in its expressed hopes for American Catholic intellectual life, a distinctively countercultural note. With Tocqueville and Orestes Brownson, Ellis takes aim at the leveling features of American egalitarianism, at what Brownson called the "American practice of dethroning all distinctions."⁶ Even more striking is this passage:

There is not a man of discernment anywhere today who is unaware that the intellectual climate of the United States is undergoing a radical change from the moribund philosophy of materialism and discredited liberalism that have ruled a good portion of the American mind for the better part of a century.⁷

³ For analogous analyses in the Evangelical world, see Carl F. H. Henry's *The Uneasy Conscience of American Fundamentalism* (1949) and Mark Noll's *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (1994).

⁴ The essay has become part of the standard liberal narrative about conservatism and anti-intellectualism because it was quoted in a section of Richard Hofstadter's famous *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. For a balanced assessment that sees Ellis's essay as one of the sole attempts at uniting Catholic revivalism with assimilation, see Philip Gleason's *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 287–91, and 322.

⁵ On this, see Gleason, *Contending with Modernity*, 314–17.

⁶ Ellis, "American Catholics and the Intellectual Life," 356.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 387

The danger for Catholics is that they will simply go with the flow. So, Ellis is critical both of a siege mentality and of conformity to the dominant cultural trends. These are, of course, the two great temptations for any immigrant population, especially one that had often suffered from virulent bigotry. Catholics combined a defensive stance with a longing for success as conventionally understood in American society. It is easy from this perspective to see the way in which anti-intellectualism could become normative. The only significance of the intellectual life would be instrumental, as a means of career advancement or apologetics.⁸ For Ellis, the mid-century crisis of Catholic universities is one of delayed maturity, a failure to become fully fledged research universities.

Over the years, some have raised questions about the accuracy of Ellis's assessment of mid-century American Catholicism.⁹ Whatever might have been the case at the time, it is certainly not now the case that Catholics inhabit a cultural or intellectual ghetto or that Catholics are not producing scholarship recognized as top notch in nearly every field imaginable. A number of Catholic universities now rank in the top tier of national research universities. Indeed, one might wonder whether Ellis was not in

⁸ In "American Catholics and the Intellectual Life," Ellis comments: "While it is gratifying to learn that so many of the graduates of Catholic institutions pursue their studies beyond college by fitting themselves for the legal and medical professions, it is to be regretted that a proportionately high number do not manifest a like desire, or find a similarly strong stimulation, to become trained scholars in the fields where the Catholic tradition of learning is the strongest" (360).

Furthermore, he observes, "More damaging than its direct effect on the intellectual shortcomings of American Catholics, has probably been the fostering by this historic bias of an overeagerness in Catholic circles for apologetics rather than pure scholarship" (361).

Initially Ellis cites anti-Catholic bias as a source of Catholic underachievement. But then toward the end he dismisses that excuse and argues that, really, lack of industry has been the chief problem. He writes: "But who, one may rightly ask, has been responsible in the main for its inadequacy? Certainly not the Church's enemies, for if one were to reason on that basis St. Augustine would never have written the *City of God*, St. Robert Bellarmine the *Tractatus de potestate summi pontificis*, nor would Cardinal Baronius have produced the *Annales ecclesiastici*. In fact, it has been enmity and opposition that have called forth some of the greatest monuments to Catholic scholarship" (367). From this list of what are simultaneously great works of scholarship and polemics, it is clear that mere assimilation to secular standards is not what Ellis has in mind for Catholic scholarship.

⁹ Ernest Fortin raises questions about the methods and the data that undergird Ellis's conclusions. He is also skeptical about some of the philosophical assumptions of the essay. See Fortin, "Do We Need Catholic Universities?" in *Human Rights, Virtue, and the Common Good: Untimely Meditations on Religion and Politics*, ed. J. Brian Benestad (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1996), 61.

some ways deeply naïve about the unmixed blessing that would result from pursuing the research ideal. Ellis seems innocent of an awareness of a rival type of crisis, one that could result precisely from the fulfillment of the ideals of the research university—the crisis already articulated by Robert Hutchins early in the century, reiterated by the likes of Jacques Maritain at mid-century, dissected with great fervor by Allan Bloom late in the century, and now—with the advent of another century—a popular theme among administrators of Ivy League universities.

Just over a half century after Ellis made his argument, Alasdair MacIntyre, perhaps the most influential living philosopher, a convert to Catholicism and a Thomist, supplies a strikingly different assessment of higher education, Catholic and non-Catholic. In many ways, MacIntyre embodies Ellis's highest hopes for Catholic intellectual life: a Catholic philosopher whose works are eagerly read at the best secular universities and who defends a specifically Catholic account of philosophy.¹⁰ Yet, in *God, Philosophy, Universities*, MacIntyre does not look on the successes of the modern research university as unadulterated blessings. MacIntyre thinks the research university is overly specialized, that it fails to give students any sense of the unity and purpose of the curriculum, that it fosters quantity over quality in scholarship, and that it lacks imaginative vision concerning the distinctive shape of undergraduate education.

An exclusive reliance on the research ideal generates neglect of certain important questions about how to introduce students to the intellectual life and what sort of appreciation of the whole ought to be nurtured in them. Indeed, the research ideal typically leads to an unnoticed exclusion of the question of what ought to distinguish undergraduate from graduate education. The result, in practice, is a trickle down approach, in which the best undergraduates are eventually initiated into the research programs appropriate to graduate students while the remaining students are offered the privilege of sitting in on reports of the results of that research.

Although he does not allude to it in the recent book, his critique in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* of the modern research university is pertinent. There MacIntyre argues that the key task for universities concerns the identification of the peculiar set of goods pursued and fostered in a university, goods whose cultivation distinguishes the university as an institution from other institutions. What are the goods? How are they ordered in relation to one another? What virtues are needed to

¹⁰ It would be significant, for Ellis, that MacIntyre was not educated in Catholic institutions, and that he rose to prominence not as a Catholic philosopher and while teaching at non-Catholic universities.

pursue these goods? How are these virtues to be cultivated?¹¹ In an instructive irony, the very institutions that claim to provide an arena for sophisticated debate about important questions, issue nothing but “stuttering ineptitudes” when asked to describe the nature, goal, and unified parts of the university itself.

Despite its celebrations of diversity, the current research university is an increasingly homogenous institution. MacIntyre argues that the modern research university embodies a distinctive account of rationality, that of encyclopedic rationality, a conception at odds with both a genealogical and a Thomist conception of rationality. So MacIntyre asks a question that never seems to have dawned on Ellis: is the Catholic conception of reason and enquiry likely to be distorted by conformity to the encyclopedic model of the university? MacIntyre’s approach is much more attuned to the significance of institutional diversity than is that of Ellis, who suffers from a kind of encyclopedic blindness, an insufficient imaginative awareness of alternative pedagogical possibilities.

Part of the problem with Ellis’s essay is that it contains numerous, somewhat inconsistent, lines of argument. On the one hand, Ellis seems to long for a future time when the Church might boast of a Catholic Einstein. On the other hand, he castigates Catholics for not cultivating excellence in spheres proper to Catholic intellectual life. In stark terms, Ellis describes one of the obstacles to Catholic academic excellence: self-betrayal. He writes:

Part of the reason why American Catholics have not made a notable impression on the intellectual life of their country is due, I am convinced, to what might be called a betrayal of that which is peculiarly their own. The nature of that betrayal has been highlighted during the last quarter of a century by such movements as the scholastic revival in philosophy which found its most enthusiastic and hard-working friends on the campuses of the University of Chicago, the University of Virginia, Princeton University, and St. John’s College, Annapolis. Meanwhile the Catholic universities were engrossed in their mad pursuit of every passing fancy that crossed the American educational scene, and found relatively little time for distinguished contributions to scholastic philosophy.¹²

¹¹ MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 222.

¹² Ellis, “American Catholics and the Intellectual Life,” 374. He adds: “Woefully lacking in the endowment, training, and equipment to make them successful competitors of the secular universities in fields like engineering, business administration, nursing education, and the like, the Catholic universities, nonetheless, went on multiplying these units and spreading their budgets so thin—in an attempt to include everything—that the subjects in which they could, and should, make a unique contribution were sorely neglected.”

There is a lot in this passage, some of which could apply to Catholic universities that have escaped the Catholic ghetto and achieved widespread scholarly recognition, but in the process have become multiversities and neglected distinctively Catholic areas of research. The list of schools at which, according to Ellis, scholasticism has found “enthusiastic and hard-working friends” is intriguing, especially the inclusion of St. John’s College. St. John’s and its famous great books program were offshoots of the Hutchins project at the University of Chicago.¹³ Chicago and St. John’s inspired some of the earliest attempts at integrated, primary-text, liberal education in Catholic institutions. The Chicago program influenced the University of Notre Dame’s Program of Liberal Studies, whose first incarnation was in the Law School,¹⁴ while the St. John’s model was adopted at the Integrated Program at St. Mary’s College in California, which in turn spawned Thomas Aquinas College.¹⁵ It is striking that the curricular influence here runs in one direction from secular to Catholic, but the intellectual influence is reciprocal. Partly through the influence of his friend and colleague, Mortimer Adler, Hutchins developed a conception of the goal of education as formation in intellectual virtue, a conception he borrowed from the writings of Newman and St. Thomas, even if he misunderstood important parts of that teaching.¹⁶

Ellis quotes from Hutchins’s 1937 address to Catholic educators at the Midwest Regional meeting of the National Catholic Education Association.¹⁷ The president of the University of Chicago issued what he termed a “scandalous accusation”: “In my opinion . . . you have imitated the worst features of secular education and ignored most of the good ones.” He went on to propose that the “best service Catholic education

¹³ The Hutchins project is often misunderstood as an attempt to impose a great books curriculum upon an entire university. Instead, it was an attempt to create a true intellectual community. “By posing fundamental questions about the aims of education and the purposes of the university, he kept the campus in turmoil, and this differentiated Hutchins’ University, 1929–1951, from other institutions of higher learning more sharply than has since been the case” (William H. McNeill, *Hutchins’ University* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007], viii).

¹⁴ pls.nd.edu/about/history/documents/PLS_History.pdf “PLS: The First Fifty Years,” Nicholas Ayo, Michael Crow, and Julia Marvin.

¹⁵ Other examples of the curricular influence could be cited. For example, a version of a great books program at Boston College, entitled Perspectives, arose in part from the vision of Ernest Fortin and his friendship with yet another Chicago faculty member, Allan Bloom.

¹⁶ See Robert Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1936), 63–68.

¹⁷ Ellis, “American Catholics and the Intellectual Life,” 375.

can perform for the nation and all education is to show that the intellectual tradition can again be made the heart of higher education.”¹⁸

In quoting him, Ellis fails to note Hutchins’s deep suspicions of the modern research university. No doubt Ellis hits upon widespread and systematic deficiencies in current Catholic institutions and intellectual life. But his remedy is naïvely optimistic. Rather than marking an advance in the discussion of Catholic Higher education, Ellis himself would seem to embody the sort of “amnesia” that MacIntyre thinks afflicts contemporary Catholic thinking about the university.

This is not to say of course that MacIntyre is opposed to research or that he is a protégé of the so-called great books movement, promoted by Hutchins and Adler. MacIntyre has in fact two serious objections to great books curricula. The first is that such curricula suppose a false unity in “our cultural heritage” and thus overlook the deep disagreements within that heritage. These books need to be read “against one another.”¹⁹ The second is that they overlook the fact that there are different and incompatible ways of reading the books. This is a hermeneutic question of course, but it points up the impossibility of an impartial reading or even of an impartial selection of texts. What looks like relativism in MacIntyre’s account is in fact a counterweight against it. Acknowledging the philosophical suppositions informing different curricular visions allows one to examine the arguments in a quest for clarity and truth. The naïve supposition of impartiality in fact sets students up to become relativists, as they are invited to treat the great texts as embodying a series of irresolvable opinions about the big questions.

MacIntyre does not deny the virtues of great books curricula. But he does not consider the possibility of constructing such curricula with explicit philosophical and theological commitments in mind. In fact, such curricula, even where they remain naïve about their ultimate commitments, have sometimes proven quite successful in promoting precisely the kind of learning MacIntyre thinks the research university fails to foster.

¹⁸ Robert M. Hutchins, “The Integrating Principle of Catholic Higher Education,” *College Newsletter*, Midwest Regional Unit, N.C.E.A. (May 1937), 1 and 4. See also Hutchins, *The Higher Learning*. Surveying the incoherence of the standard university curricula in America, Hutchins boldly proclaims that “without theology or metaphysics a university cannot exist” (99). The only type of unity evident in the modern university is that of an encyclopedia and its “alphabetical arrangement”; what is needed is a “hierarchy of truths” (95). He calls for an “evangelistic movement” that would aim at the “conversion” of individuals and of the teaching profession itself to the “true conception of general education” (87).

¹⁹ MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 228–29.

Prior to the Chicago project, there was Columbia's general education curriculum, which began in 1919 and flourished under the leadership of John Erskine and which has been dubbed "the most famous course ever in the history of American curriculum."²⁰ The initial forms of this curriculum were inspired not by antiquarianism but by a felt need to help students address contemporary problems, particularly in the wake of World War I. The goal was not to guide students into careers but to "help them see life broadly." Erskine traced the genesis of his course to a widespread concern within the faculty about "the literary ignorance of the younger generation."

One of the students who profited from Columbia's curricular innovations and the faculty who formed its distinctive culture was a young Thomas Merton. When Merton began his studies at Columbia in 1935, he found himself in an English literature course taught by Mark Van Doren, whose pedagogy had a transformative effect on Merton. "Who is this man who really loves what he has to teach, and does not secretly detest all literature, and abhor poetry, while pretending to be a professor of it?"²¹ Merton was drawn to the course because it addressed the most important questions and spoke to the deepest longings of the human soul and it did so in a way that crossed standard disciplinary divisions into literature, philosophy, and theology: "It was the only place where I ever heard anything really sensible about any of the things that were really fundamental—life, death, time, love, sorrow, fear, wisdom, suffering, eternity."²² It was also at Columbia that Merton would encounter a group of students who had a passion for books, a love of conversation, and a commitment to probing the most important questions about their lives. It was here that he became familiar with the writings of Maritain, Gilson, St. Thomas, and a host of medieval authors, who were being read enthusiastically by faculty and students alike.

To discover the unifying telos of his quest, Merton would have to move beyond the reaches of his Columbia education, to the Catholic contempla-

²⁰ W.B. Carnochan, *The Battleground of the Curriculum* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 71. Harry Carman put it even more directly. "In introducing the general survey course," he said, "Columbia has operated on the assumption that it is not the fundamental business of the College to turn out specialists in a narrow field, and that an individual is, after all, not well educated unless he or she has at least some conception of the broad field of intellectual endeavor" (Harry J. Carman, "The Columbia Course in Contemporary Civilization," an address delivered before the Association of History Teachers of the Middle States and Maryland at Bryn Mawr, 2 May 1925, published as a booklet by the Columbia College dean, p. 2).

²¹ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948), 141.

²² *Ibid.*, 178.

tive life, articulated in theology by Thomas Aquinas and practiced in the Trappist monastic community. Yet, in what he did find at Columbia, we can discern certain key elements of a truly liberal education. First, it responds to the most important questions of human life, questions posed at least implicitly by all human beings at one time or another. Second, it understands itself as responding to a felt need, a lack, a longing in the soul. Third, it reflects, and helps students to reflect upon, the relationship of the parts of their education to one another and to the unified whole and end of the curriculum. Fourth, it embodies and cultivates a community of inquirers in which faculty converse with one another and with students and students converse with one another both inside and outside the classroom.

What Merton found at Columbia was a protreptic, an introductory turning of the soul to the most important things and an initiation in the activities constitutive of the life of intellectual virtue. This is more than academic training, or the mastery of rudimentary skills. What students need today is what they have always needed. They need to see themselves as heirs of a great tradition of learning that they could delightfully spend the rest of their lives trying to master and barely make a beginning. This may involve not just learning, but, as Augustine indicates, unlearning. The answer to the problem is *paideia*, as the Greeks called it, an initial training in the various disciplines or sciences with an aim of enabling the student (a) to understand parts in relation to one another and to the whole, and (b) to distinguish different sorts of proof, and to demand of a subject matter, as Aristotle puts it, the degree and type of certitude proper to that discipline.²³

Much of what Merton found at Columbia is simply absent from our contemporary research universities. In *God Philosophy, Universities*, MacIntyre argues “neither the university nor philosophy is any longer seen as engaging the questions” of “plain persons.” These questions include: “What is our place in the order of things? Of what powers in the natural and social world do we need to take account? How should we respond to the facts of suffering and death? What is our relationship to the dead? What is it to live a human life well? What is it to live it badly?”²⁴

The university is silent about the fundamental questions of human life, even as administrators issue “stuttering ineptitudes” concerning the relationships of means to end and part to whole. MacIntyre writes: “In

²³ See Ernest Fortin, “The Paradoxes of Aristotle’s Theory of Education in the Light of Recent Controversies,” in *The Birth of Philosophic Christianity: Studies in Early Christian and Medieval Thought*, ed. J. Brian Benestad (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 209–22.

²⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 9.

contemporary American universities each academic discipline is treated as autonomous and self-defining, so that its practitioners, or at least the most prestigious and influential among them, prescribe to those entering the discipline what its scope and limits are. And in order to excel in any one particular discipline, one need in general know little or nothing about any of the others.” Although MacIntyre does not state it explicitly, there are two dimensions to his account of the goal and structure of the university. It ought to be an arena for the investigation of the most important human questions and it ought to initiate the student into the history and current state of inquiry in a set of disciplines in the natural sciences, the social sciences, the humanities, and theology. Great books curricula are much better at the former than at the latter; research universities are better at the latter than at the former. One of the virtues of MacIntyre’s book is to treat these as interconnected tasks for the university. He also underscores the philosophical question of the unifying end or goal of all of human inquiry. That is the significance of the inclusion of “God” in the title.

II. Diagnosing the Afflictions of the Research University

Focusing on a set of distinct disciplines raises the question, “To whom then in such a university falls the task of integrating the various disciplines, of considering the bearing of each on the others, and of asking how each contributes to the overall understanding of the nature and order of things? The answer is ‘No one,’ but even that answer is misleading. For there is no sense in the contemporary American university that there is such a task, that something that matters is being left undone.”²⁵ About the last point MacIntyre seems simply wrong. There is a mounting awareness of the importance of this task and of how much is being left undone. Where MacIntyre improves upon these critiques is in the areas of diagnosis and prognosis.

In the early twenty-first century, in America’s elite universities, institutions renowned across the globe, there is growing unease. Having become increasingly skeptical about knowledge itself, our most prestigious educational institutions now find themselves ill-equipped to educate youth for the common good. Or so an emerging consensus would have us believe. Two books from Harvard administrators are signs of this spirit of self-criticism. Derek Bok, former president at Harvard, has written *Our Underachieving Colleges*; and Harry Lewis, a former dean at Harvard, has just published *Excellence Without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education*—a central contention of which is the dismal judgment that the “ideal

²⁵ MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities*, 15–16.

of liberal education lives on in name only.”²⁶ Some of the complaints for which Allan Bloom was once reviled are now common in higher education. Many are now pondering Hutchins’s question from the 1930s: Why is it that the “chief characteristic of higher learning is its disorder”?²⁷

Many of the tasks imposed on the research university encourage forgetfulness of the university’s core mission: offering a unified vision of the intellectual life. A variety of ends, more or less desirable, more or less connected to the fundamental aims of the university, can come to replace the pursuit of truth. Aquinas, Newman, Hutchins, Ellis, and MacIntyre concur in the judgment that instrumentalization is one of the great enemies of a truly liberal education.²⁸ Careerism is the standard target here. But instrumentalization can occur in a variety of ways, as, for example, when the chief role of education is expressed in political terms as preparation for citizenship or in moral and religious terms as making good persons or effective apologists. But there is a more pervasive structural problem with university life; in MacIntyre’s terms, it has to do with the tension between practices and institutions, the latter of which grow out of the need for the organization of a complex set of practices and out of the desire to sustain practices over time. But what is a practice? In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre defines a practice as a “coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and

²⁶ Derek Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Harry Lewis, *Excellence Without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs, 2006). One would need to add to these, books by Anthony Kronman, former dean of the Yale School of Law, a forthcoming book and numerous essays by Andrew Delbanco of Columbia, and essays by New York Times columnist David Brooks. See Anthony Kronman, *Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007); see the interview with Delbanco on his forthcoming book: “The State of Liberal Education,” in *The Cresset* 74 (2008), available online at www.valpo.edu/cresset/2008/Michaelmas08/Interview1_M08.pdf. For Brooks, see “The Organization Kid,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (April 2001).

²⁷ Hutchins, *The Higher Learning*, 94.

²⁸ We might put this point in terms of a distinction from Alasdair MacIntyre between goods internal and external to a practice. Internal goods are constitutive of the practice itself; without them, the practice could no longer exist. External goods are extrinsic to the practice itself but may be closely allied to it as consequences or antecedent conditions. The problem with modern education is that it is far too beholden to the external goods. For a quite different defense of the goods intrinsic to university education and an excoriation of the practice of politicizing the curriculum, see Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.”²⁹ A practice involves a complex set of activities; it is principally ordered to the pursuit of goods internal to, and constitutive of, the practice; and the appraisal of how well those goods are achieved invokes standards of excellence, chiefly articulated in terms of a set of virtues. Much more than practices, institutions are about the fostering of goods that are external to practices, goods that may indeed serve the continued existence of the practice but may also undermine the cultivation of the virtues constitutive of a practice.

The goods internal to the practices constitutive of a university have to do with the pursuit of truth in a variety of disciplines. In a book published not long before he died, *Truth and Truthfulness*, the stridently secular British philosopher Bernard Williams noted that we live in a time when the demand for truth has never been greater.³⁰ But, he added, we have never been more doubtful about our ability to reach the truth or even whether there is truth to be had. Williams saw the cultural, and particularly academic, despair over truth as a troubling sign. He criticized the ironic distance from which many academics, particularly in the humanities, approached truth. If we lose our hold on the truth, he observed, we risk losing everything. Williams was principally concerned with the way in which skepticism about truth in the humanities rendered the study of the humanities pointless and fostered in faculty puerile political correctness and desultory careerism. MacIntyre focuses on the way in which goods external to practices, the sort that entice institutions, come to substitute for the internal goods. Among the external goods of a university are rankings and various other types of prestige and, of course, money in the forms of grants and donations.

Although MacIntyre readily admits that practices cannot be sustained over time without the development of institutions to perpetuate them, he is also wary of the way in which institutions suffer from forgetfulness of the practices for the sake of which they were initiated. Institutions tend to focus on external goods, that is, on the goods of effectiveness rather than the goods of excellence. What MacIntyre has to say about institutional forms that foster common goods is especially pertinent to the university: “The institutional forms through which such a way of life is realized, although economically various, have this in common: they do

²⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 187.

³⁰ Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

not promote economic growth and they require some significant degree of insulation from and protection from the forces generated by outside markets.”³¹ One does not have to adopt the Socratic stance that no fees ought to be taken for teaching to see that the community of teachers and learners is not a community grounded in economic motives. MacIntyre of course still retains much of his Marxist animosity against the market economy. Yet, the following claim seems entirely within the mainstream of Catholic thinking about economics and the common good: “Market relationships can only be sustained by being embedded in certain types of local nonmarket relationship, relationships of uncalculated giving and receiving, if they are to contribute to overall flourishing, rather than, as they so often in fact do, undermine and corrupt communal ties.”³² Indeed, Catholic educational institutions would seem to be proper arenas for the teaching of precisely such a lesson about the limits of the market.

In defending, as we should, the notion that knowledge is its own end, that wonder is proper to human nature, and that the university ought never to lose sight of its own internal goods, we ought to be careful not to obscure the link between the good and the useful. Newman was careful to avoid this.³³ He found a place for professional education in his university and noted that what is desirable for its own sake can be productive of other goods. The good, as Dionysius puts it in a line much beloved by medieval thinkers, is diffusive.³⁴

³¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court Press, 2001), 145.

³² *Ibid.*, 117.

³³ In his remarkable defense of liberal education as an end in itself, W. E. B. DuBois, for his part, insists that the goal of education is “not to inspire human hearts with a vision of the true, the good, and beautiful without pointing the practical way of realizing some of these dreams here and now in their own lives.” See *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Classics, 1989). Education, he argues, must balance ideals with the “greater need of specialization and technique.” The vast majority of black as of white Americans will devote themselves to technical education, not liberal education. For all of his emphasis on the intrinsic desirability of liberal education, he does not hesitate to speak of its practical, political and social ramifications. One of his chief arguments against Washington’s willingness to limit education to the rudiments of knowledge followed by specialized training in a trade is that it leaves out of account the question who will teach the teachers, who will teach them how to understand their own work in relation to the whole of learning. Another argument concerns education as preparation for virtuous citizenship. “No secure civilization can be built in the south with the Negro as an ignorant, turbulent proletariat” (*ibid.*, 73).

³⁴ In this context, Stanley Rosen’s reading of Plato in terms of a theoretico-productive conception of the intellect is pertinent. See my article “Modern Ancients: Stanley Rosen’s Achievement,” *Weekly Standard*, November 25, 2002.

Some such account of practice-based pursuits of the common good would seem to be necessary to recover a Catholic understanding of the university. The accent, in *God, Philosophy, Universities*, on the Catholic understanding of philosophy, the intellectual life, and theology counters the tendency in thinking about the Catholic university to undervalue the core task of the university: the complex and unified pursuit of truth. But there is another danger: that of neglecting the relationship between the core task and the other tasks of the university. This too is a result of the bureaucratization and specialization of the university.

The task for the university is not just to foster the goods internal to the various practices included within it but also to order the various practices in relation to one another and in light of the unifying end of the institution. Lack of integration—of student life or dorm life with academic or classroom activity, of the various disciplines themselves, of the research pursuits of faculty with the needs of undergraduates—afflicts the contemporary university.

By contrast, Newman, to whom MacIntyre turns at a crucial point in *God, Philosophy, Universities*, supposes that students and faculty interact both in and out of the classroom, indeed, that they live among one another. This points us to an underappreciated or, to be more precise, misunderstood, component of the university: student life. Certainly if *student life*, encompassing what occurs on campus but outside the classroom, fosters habits of self-indulgence, moral relativism, and anti-intellectualism, then it will matter very little what occurs in the classroom.³⁵ There is a huge opportunity here for partnerships between student life and the academic units of the university, the goal of which would be to integrate academic and student life, what goes on in the classroom and what occurs in the dorm—in short, to raise the level of conversation and thus to create a true community of learning. (We might in the process want to consider eliminating the term “dormitory” as the place where students retreat to sleep or not, from our vocabulary.) Of course, the propaganda about the university as a community or even a family permeates our marketing to high school students. But most universities are at best a set of mostly isolated and occasionally interactive communities: academic communities in the form of departments and institutes and administrative communities in divisions of human resources, legal counsel, student life, campus ministry, public relations, athletics, central administration, and regent governing boards. A university governed by the Catholic understanding of the common good would require a much

³⁵ Curbing the sort of collegiate bacchanalian reverie depicted in Tom Wolfe’s novel *I Am Charlotte Simmons* is not the only or the primary goal of an office of student life.

greater degree of mutual interaction and shared governance among these various communities. It would require mutual accountability across the lines that divide athletic departments from faculty and both of these from regents and administrators.

If we focus just on the properly academic core of the university, even here a community of learning cannot be present without the ability of faculty and students to talk to one another across disciplinary specialties. A useful thought experiment for those of us in universities is to imagine how the following conversation, real-life versions of which were actually conducted at Chicago under Hutchins, might go: In order to earn its way into the core, each department must defend its role before faculty from all other departments in the university in a public conversation about the contribution of that discipline to the education of undergraduates. At most universities, such a conversation would result in mutual recrimination and paralysis.

One promising, although problematic, recent curricular innovation that merits attention as an attempt to address the problem of lack of integration is interdisciplinarity, which is all the rage nowadays on many campuses. As Louis Menand convincingly argues in his recent book, *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University*, interdisciplinarity is mostly a negative notion, a postmodern frustration with the constraints of disciplinarity, a way of overcoming disciplinarity.³⁶ But, as Menand also points out, the movement simply recreates the problems of disciplinarity at a higher level. This is certainly not the impetus for the sort of integrated education that Newman articulates. This approach is not opposed to disciplines; it affirms them and seeks to find ways to integrate them. Of course, if you are allergic to saying what the ends of education are, you will likely have trouble saying how the parts fit together. Newman has a classical sense of ends and of the part/whole relationship. He also has a supple account of what we might call cognitive development, an account that lends itself to, and might provide a corrective to the weaknesses in, contemporary interest in interdisciplinary curricula. He writes:

We know, not by a direct and simple vision, not at a glance, but, as it were, by piecemeal and accumulation, by a mental process, by going round an object, by the comparison, the combination, the mutual correction, the continual adaptation, of many partial notions, by the employment, concentration, and joint action of many faculties and

³⁶ Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2010).

exercises of mind. Such a union and concert of the intellectual powers, such an enlargement and development, such a comprehensiveness, is necessarily a matter of training . . . of discipline and habit.³⁷

Enlargement, development, adaptation, and the habituation of the intellect in the discernment of the integrated complexity of the objects of knowledge—all these are fitting objects of a truly liberal education. Newman provides us with principles for thinking anew about an interdisciplinary approach to education. Newman provides what other proponents of interdisciplinarity lack: an account of human knowing, cognitive development, and human nature.³⁸ Standard interdisciplinary programs suffer the same shortcoming that MacIntyre detects in great books curricula: the suppressing of the question of the philosophical assumptions of the curriculum.

III. Taking Soul Seriously

As we have noted, *God, Philosophy, Universities* has very little to say about universities; yet, in his analysis of the philosophical principles that undergird a Catholic conception of the intellectual life, MacIntyre focuses on the central role of the Aristotelian and Thomist understanding of soul and body. At the center of a Catholic university, according to MacIntyre, would be the articulation and dialectical development of the Catholic account of human nature. He writes:

Such an account will have to integrate what we can learn about the nature and constitution of human beings from physicists, chemists, and biologists, historians, economists, and sociologists, with the kind of understanding of human beings that only theology can afford.³⁹

As MacIntyre notes, atheists and theists disagree not just about God but also about nature.⁴⁰ Philosophy, on this view, is required not only to articulate the Catholic understanding of nature and human nature but also to bring that understanding into conversation with the conceptions of human nature, often only implicit, in the natural and social sciences. Catholic philosophers need to be involved in ongoing dialogue with ancient, medieval, and modern rival philosophical understandings of

³⁷ Newman, *The Idea of a University* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 114–15.

³⁸ As MacIntyre notes, Newman and Aquinas share certain general commitments to Aristotelian principles in philosophy, but they also differ on important points.

³⁹ MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities*, 177.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

human nature. The locus of the conversation is not just within philosophy and theology departments but also between these departments and the natural and social sciences. Moreover, if the university is to be seen as addressing the questions of “plain persons,” it must find a way of engaging that culture with the initial goal of making clear what assumptions about human nature are operative in it.

It may well be that classical liberal education presupposes and embodies a distinctive philosophical and theological anthropology.⁴¹ Might it be that forgetfulness of soul is the source of what Hutchins identifies as the chief characteristic of the higher learning in our time, namely, disorder?

That there is a need for such an account of human nature and its relationship to debates in the natural and social sciences comes from the tradition of liberal education itself, which stretches from Socrates to W. E. B. DuBois, who in his famous *Souls of Black Folk* penned the most eloquent defense of liberal education ever composed by an American. DuBois is best known for his debate with Booker T. Washington over post-Reconstruction civil rights strategies. A consequence of Washington’s more conservative approach is the acceptance of the continued exclusion of African-Americans from higher education.

Although ignored in contemporary retellings of this standoff, DuBois makes higher education the centerpiece of his argument. For DuBois, this was about more than simply equal opportunity. To refuse African-Americans access to a truly liberal education, to relegate them to training in trades, was to deny their full humanity. Every other sort of education renders human beings fit to perform this or that role in business or society; it makes them serviceable, as we say. But this is to treat education—and human beings—in a merely instrumental fashion.

DuBois shares Socrates’ objections to a citizenry that gives no thought to true education, to what DuBois calls the “riddle of existence,” or to the cultivation of what Socrates identifies as the “best possible state of the soul.” DuBois asserts: “The true college will ever have one goal—not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes.”

As Socrates insists in a number of places, the Athenians give no thought to true education, to the state of the soul, to the consideration of what DuBois calls the “riddle of existence.”⁴² In response to the statement of the god at Delphi, Socrates asks, “Whatever does the god mean? What is his riddle?”⁴³ This is precisely the language DuBois uses in his eloquent description of the nature of true education.

⁴¹ See *ibid.*, 177 and throughout.

⁴² DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 58.

⁴³ Plato, *Apology*, 21b.

The riddle of existence is the college curriculum that was laid before the Pharaohs, that was taught in groves by Plato, that formed the trivium and quadrivium, and is to-day laid before the freedman's sons by Atlanta University. And this course of study will not change; its methods will grow more deft and effectual, its content richer by toil of scholar and sight of seer; but the true college will ever have one goal—not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes.⁴⁴

One way to express DuBois's argument is to say that he, like Socrates, takes the term "soul" seriously, as indicating a sense of what is higher and lower, better and worse, in human life. The word "soul" also figures in the title of Harry Lewis's book about Harvard. But what does Lewis mean by "soul"? Can contemporary academics use the term without putting it in scare quotes to indicate its status as a relic from a bygone age of religious primitivism? Without snickering, can we seriously pose to our students the challenge Socrates posed to the Athenians, who in this case are a pretty good stand-in for Americans? Can we issue the challenge to give more care to the soul than to the body?⁴⁵

Of course, one of the reasons for the decline in language about the soul is the aversion in the contemporary university to theology, understood as something more than the comparative study of cultural constructs. In *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, in a piece entitled "One University Under God," Stanley Fish notes the increasingly intellectual interest in religion among students, even at secular campuses. Fish notes that the old cultural assumption, especially prevalent in academia and the media, that we could "quarantine the religious impulse in the safe houses of the church, the synagogue, and the mosque" is coming undone. And he

⁴⁴ DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 58.

⁴⁵ These questions bring us back to Tom Wolfe's satire, which seizes on the problematic status of the soul in the contemporary university. Mr. Wolfe's title character, Charlotte Simmons, brings with her to the fictional Dupont University a conception of soul she inherits from her devoutly Christian mother, who uses the word soul without any hint of irony or doubt. By contrast, one of Charlotte's professors, a Nobel winner for his work in neuroscience, uses the term "soul" advisedly. The self, he asserts, is "nothing more than a 'transient composite of materials from the environment.'" In an interesting convergence between the sciences and the humanities, the dissolution of the self into a series of intersecting impersonal forces is also a prominent feature of an influential postmodern philosophy. There is, at the heart of the modern university as experienced by Charlotte, a nihilism concerning human nature and human purpose.

Mr. Wolfe's book suggests a subtle link between the demotion of the soul to a ghost in a machine and the exhaustion of young adult life in a series of activities—work, study, drinking, sex—lacking any overarching sense of mission.

wonders whether the university is in a position to take seriously what is fast becoming the most important topic in the cultural and intellectual life of Americans. In so doing, he makes an important distinction: "It is one thing to take religion as an object of study and another to take religion seriously. To take religion seriously would be to regard it not as a phenomenon to be analyzed at arm's length, but as a candidate for the truth."⁴⁶ MacIntyre would concur, but he focuses our attention on the philosophical question of the existence of God, as the ultimate and unifying aim of inquiry. Thus, the question of the truth about God is not just a question to be investigated in the university; the answer to the question bears upon the university itself, upon whether there is any unified end to human inquiry. For MacIntyre, that question cannot be approached directly. Following Aristotle and Thomas, he holds that, at least in philosophy, God is not the point of departure for inquiry, but its culmination. The results of investigations into nature and human nature will determine in large part whether philosophy reaches God at all.

As MacIntyre notes, materialism and dualism, the two early modern substitutes for Aristotelian unity of soul and body, radically alter the conception of the human person, by undermining the teleological account of human nature. Coincidentally in the early modern period, the desire for consensus and the project of mastering and possessing nature supplant the notion of human life as characterized by open-ended wonder, by a quest for the highest good. Philosophy inevitably loses what John Paul II has called its "sapiential dimension," its quest for wisdom about the whole. As he puts it in *Fides et Ratio* (1998):

It is necessary not to abandon the passion for ultimate truth or the eagerness to search for it or the audacity to forge new paths in the search. It is faith that stirs reason to move beyond all isolation and willingly to run risks so that it may attain whatever is beautiful, good, and true. Faith thus becomes the convinced and convincing advocate of reason.

The Pope's recalling of the Church's universities to their Catholicity is simultaneously a reminder of what makes them universities. Indeed, it now looks as if the most likely hope for the restoration of the university to its proper self-understanding is the religious university. While not quite making that claim, MacIntyre's *God, Philosophy, Universities* advances the contemporary debate about the university by returning the conversation

⁴⁶ Stanley Fish, "One University Under God," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (January 7, 2005).

to a discussion of philosophical principles and by articulating a coherent Catholic and Thomistic response to the question of the nature and goal of intellectual inquiry and how we might recover a unified conception of the disciplines that constitute the university. **N·V**