

Human Dignity and the Catholic University: A Vision

ADRIAN J. REIMERS
University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, Indiana

“BORN from the heart of the Church,”¹ the Catholic university shares in the Church’s mission. Even if most of what the Catholic university undertakes is not directly religious, its work is to be part of the Church’s work. The Catholic university, like her secular counterparts, prepares its students for work in scholarship, government, commerce, and the professions. Her scholars are as diverse and their disciplines as mutually divergent as those of any other university. The principle of unity for an institution with specialists in both medieval French literature and organic chemistry, whether secular or religious, is not immediately evident, and much less so is its relationship with the Catholic faith. And, we may ask, what has the history of patristic debates about *homoiousios* and *homoousios* to do with the anthropologist’s analyses of social structures in post-colonial Africa? This essay proposes a unifying vision for today’s Catholic university, a vision that embraces both teaching and research and which also unifies her diverse multiplicity of disciplines under the aspect of her Catholicity. It is a vision founded on the Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, especially as that document has been interpreted by Pope John Paul II.

A New Humanism

From day to day, in every group or nation, there is an increase in the number of men and women who are conscious that they themselves are the authors and the artisans of the culture of their community. . . . This becomes more clear if we consider the unification of the world

¹ John Paul II, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, §1.

and the duty which is imposed upon us, that we build a better world based upon truth and justice. Thus we are witnesses of the birth of a new humanism, one in which man is defined first of all by this responsibility to his brothers and to history.²

Just what is this humanism? And how do we educators and scholars fulfill that responsibility to build a humanistic culture, responsible to our brothers and sisters and to future generations? We university educators and scholars invariably regard ourselves as “authors and artisans” of our cultures. We pride ourselves on our responsibility to help the national mind, to influence how the young think. The Council defines culture as “everything whereby man develops and perfects his many bodily and spiritual qualities.”³

Later in that same document, the Council indicates an important aspect of our role:

Furthermore, when man gives himself to the various disciplines of philosophy, history and of mathematical and natural science, and when he cultivates the arts he can do very much to elevate the human family to a more sublime understanding of truth, goodness, and beauty, and to the formation of considered opinions which have universal value.⁴

This text relates directly to the university, which is where deeper penetration into the various scientific disciplines is carried out and where the arts are cultivated and taught. We must note carefully, however, the value that the Council ascribes to these activities. Although the various academic and scientific disciplines have immense practical value—this is, after all, why good schools are vital to economic development—the principal value the Council finds in them is humanistic. The work of the university can “elevate the human family to a more sublime understanding of truth, goodness, and beauty.” And the Council proceeds to say that such education can lead to the “formation of considered opinions which have universal value.” In other words, the objective should not simply be the preparation of technically proficient specialists, but the formation of minds who are wise, whose views and perspective are universal.

Pope John Paul II develops the ecclesiastical implications of this humanist perspective in his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*:

² Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, §55.

³ *Ibid.*, §53.

⁴ *Ibid.*, §57.

Man in the full truth of his existence, of his personal being and also of his community and social being . . . this man is the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission: *he is the primary and fundamental way for the Church*, the way traced out by Christ himself.⁵

The task of the Church, its vocation and mission, is to advocate for man, for the truth about the human being. John Paul here cites the Council's reference to the human aspiration to "truth, the good, the beautiful, justice and love."⁶ Furthermore the Church must remain keenly aware of and confront everything that constitutes a threat to man, and in this initial encyclical, John Paul the Great summarizes these threats: "The man of today seems ever to be under the threat from what he produces, that is to say from the result of the work of his hands and, even more so, of the work of his intellect and the tendencies of his will."⁷ If the text of *Gaudium et Spes* reflects the Cold War fears of nuclear annihilation and growing disparities of wealth in the world, John Paul II's text reflects on the divisions in man's heart. His text continues: "All too soon, and often in an unforeseeable way, what this manifold activity of man yields is not only subjected to 'alienation,' in the sense that it is simply taken away from the person who produces it, but rather it turns against man himself."⁸ What he points to are not simply the objective harms that arise from the development of technological weapons and the irresponsible exploitation of the environment, but also the meaninglessness, the nihilism,⁹ implicit in the consumer society. "Man often seems to see no other meaning in his natural environment than what serves for immediate use and consumption."¹⁰ What threatens man, therefore, is the distortion of culture, which results from the "ascendancy of technology," that is, technological development that is not matched by "a proportional development of morals and ethics."¹¹ Our concern, therefore, as "authors and artisans" of our culture must be humanistic, which is to say directed toward the full development of human beings precisely as human.

Christocentrism

A distinctive challenge to the Catholic university is the requirement that it be Christocentric. Let us consider one of John Paul II's favorite conciliar texts:

⁵ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, §14.

⁶ Ibid. Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, §57, quoted above.

⁷ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, §15.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ On nihilism see also John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, §91.

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, §15.

¹¹ Ibid.

The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. . . . Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.¹²

This is a particularly challenging requirement, since it hinges not upon some truth readily accessible to the academic community as a whole but rather to those who have received and embraced the Christian revelation. What this text from *Gaudium et Spes* asserts is that any understanding of human nature that does not take into account the Incarnation of Jesus Christ is somehow inadequate or even flawed. It follows, therefore, that whoever does not know Christ does not fully know himself. The destiny of the human being, the purpose of human life (“his supreme calling”), is ultimately known only through Christ. This text need not mean—indeed it cannot mean—that the results of the various sciences dealing with human nature (such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, and economics) are false or scientifically incomplete if they do not have recourse to the Gospels. However, it does mean that the humanistic sciences cannot of themselves fully account for the human being and his destiny, that their valid conclusions must somehow be situated in the broader context of what God has revealed in Christ. The Catholic university is securely confident not only that her faith can be reconciled with secular inquiry, but even more that her faith shines essential light on human knowledge.

Elements of a Vision

If, as George Weigel suggests, “the anthropological question is fundamental” (see Weigel, p. 260), to answer that question becomes a fundamental task for the Catholic university. Because the Catholic university is “born from the heart of the Church,” and indeed, because the university by its very nature is concerned specifically with truth, a central theme for the Catholic university must be, in the words of *Redemptor Hominis*, “man in the full truth of his existence, of his personal being and also of his community and social being.”¹³ From this we may infer a coherent and comprehensive contemporary vision: *The mission of the Catholic university is to explore and understand the mystery of the human person and in doing so to manifest his inherent dignity and transcendent destiny.* Whatever concerns the mystery of the human person is the object of the Catholic university’s research and teaching. This plainly includes the full scope of the liberal

¹² *Gaudium et Spes*, §22.

¹³ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, §15.

and fine arts, and, even if less obviously, the pure and applied sciences as well. Most certainly this mystery can direct our approach to the political, commercial, legal, and medical professions. It will be my purpose here to explore and flesh out the implications of this vision, to find the points of application to the life of a complex and diverse academic institution. Not all academic disciplines pertain directly to human nature. Even if a sociological survey or psychological experiment leads to conclusions about human nature, the physicist's data from his particle accelerator tell us nothing directly about ourselves. Nonetheless, we can identify two fundamental and universal norms that apply to scholars in all disciplines: the normativity of truth and the vocation to wisdom.

The Normativity of Truth

Pope John Paul II characterizes the academic calling in terms of its relationship with truth, because the purpose of intellectual inquiry is to attain knowledge and understanding of truth:

By vocation, the *Universitas magistrorum et scholarium* is dedicated to research, to teaching and to the education of students who freely associate with their teachers in a common love of knowledge.¹⁴

Some would challenge even this norm, recalling, perhaps, Lawrence H. Summers's remark in his 2001 presidential installation address at Harvard University: "The university is open to all ideas, but it is committed to the skepticism that is the hallmark of education."¹⁵ Certainly it is true that a spirit of skepticism has taken hold within the higher education establishment in the United States and Europe. To claim certain knowledge of truth—especially revealed truth—is generally unacceptable within the secular academy.¹⁶ The contemporary scholar, to be credible, is expected to be skeptical of all truth claims. Indeed he must suspect the very claim that there is such a reality as truth. The great danger, however, to the scholar who abandons truth is that he becomes nothing more than a clever hired hand for other powers—government, military, corporate—who want to make use of his brainpower for their own goals. Indeed, this

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, §1.

¹⁵ Lawrence H. Summers, "Address made by President Summers at his Installation ceremony on Oct. 12," *Harvard University Gazette*, October 18, 2001. Downloaded September 28, 2007, from www.hno.harvard.edu/gazette/2001/10.18/04-speechtext.html.

¹⁶ Here see Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's homily of the Mass "Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice," April 18, 2005, accessed June 9, 2005 from www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html, and especially

is a serious challenge currently facing scientific researchers in the U.S., especially those receiving funding from pharmaceutical firms. Here we are reminded of Thrasymachus's famous definition of justice as "the advantage of the stronger."¹⁷ Socrates's provocative interlocutor understood the nature of power and its use, and if the university is simply another realm governed by the exercise of power, then we must look to Thrasymachus for guidance. To refute Thrasymachus, Socrates defended the truth about the human soul and its transcendence toward the true and the good.

If it was important to Socrates, the truth about the human person is especially important to the Catholic university. The Catholic university's intellectual life should be grounded specifically in the truth concerning the human being's (1) origin and constitution, (2) moral life, and (3) destiny.

Origin and Constitution

The first chapter of Genesis tells us, "God created man in his image, . . . male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27), and Catholic tradition repeatedly affirms this.¹⁸ Because human beings are immersed in and part of the rest of creation, the sciences can study our organic constitution using the tools of biology. Paleoanthropology can search out the origins and ancestors of our species. Every university's biologists must avail themselves of Charles Darwin's discoveries and subsequent developments in the theory of evolution by random variations and natural selection. What Catholic scholars cannot accept—and this is something that too many in the secular academy affirm—is the notion that human beings are *nothing more than* the product of blind chance, that the human being is no more than a particularly sophisticated accident of biological mechanisms. By its very canons biology cannot establish this, and Vatican II rejected it: "Now man is not wrong when he regards himself as superior to bodily concerns, and as more than a speck of nature or a nameless constituent of the city of man."¹⁹ Because his existence is willed by the God whose image he is, the human person cannot be reduced to his physical or social aspects. Rather,

noteworthy is his address as Benedict XVI at the University of Regensburg, September 12, 2006, in which the Pope traces the roots of this skepticism in modern thought. Address accessed June 9, 2008 from www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html.

¹⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, 338c.

¹⁸ See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I–II, prologue; *Summa contra Gentiles* II, chap. 85; *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 355 ff., and Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, §4.

¹⁹ *Gaudium et Spes*, §14.

a being at once thoroughly material and spiritual, he transcends the material world. "Though made of body and soul, man is one. Through his bodily composition he gathers to himself the elements of the material world; thus they reach their crown through him, and through him raise their voice in free praise to the Creator."²⁰ The human person is a metaphysical being.

The Council continues on to affirm, "Man judges rightly that by his intellect he surpasses the material universe."²¹ The truths that we pursue in the university are not simply practical survival techniques, nor are they our own inventions. As scholars we stand before something greater than ourselves. Isaac Newton wrote: "I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me."²² Our capacity for knowledge is far more than an ability to come up with true statements, somehow to store appropriate data within the brain and then apply it technologically. To put the point negatively, Daniel Dennett's thesis that the brain (and nervous system) are an "anticipation machine,"²³ a complex mechanism to detect environmental changes relevant to the well-being of the organism, constitutes an inadequate account of human understanding. Aristotle's dictum "The soul is in a way all things"²⁴ means that to understand something is to have incorporated its essence—its "what-it-is"—into one's own mind, so that (for instance) a scientist does not simply know about chemistry; he is a chemist. The structures that govern chemical interactions have become the structures by which his thinking is governed. In this way whoever knows some truth shares in the mind of the Creator. Thus St. John of the Cross could say, "A single human thought is worth more than the whole world." Our souls, by their very capacity to know the truth, reflect the divine nature. And therefore St. John continues his reflections by saying that "only God is worthy of it."²⁵ Precisely because the capacity to study and to understand truth is a privileged sharing in the Creator's own activity, Newton could stand awestruck before the "great ocean of truth." As John Paul II put it, "One may define the human being, therefore, as the *one who seeks the*

²⁰ Ibid., §14.

²¹ Ibid., §15.

²² David Brewster, *Memoirs of Newton* (1855), accessed October 1, 2007 from www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Isaac_Newton/.

²³ Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston, Toronto, London: Little, Brown, & Co., 1991), 177, 360 ff, and 382.

²⁴ Aristotle, *On the Soul*, III, 8 (431b 21).

²⁵ San Juan de la Cruz, *Dichos de luz y amor*, 34: "Un sólo pensamiento del hombre vale más que todo el mundo; por tanto, sólo Dios es digno de él."

truth.”²⁶ The very pursuit and knowledge of truth is itself a great sign of human dignity, of his transcendence with respect to the material world.

Recognizing the capacity of the human person to transcend the purely physical order, the Catholic university affirms the premise that his origin and constitution necessarily reflects his relationship with and likeness to the Divine.

Moral Life

When Cardinal Ratzinger addressed the Conclave that was to elect him as pope, he warned against a “dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires.”²⁷ It seems curious to call the affirmation of one’s own ego and desires a “dictatorship.” Nevertheless, despite its attractiveness, relativism undercuts human dignity precisely by negating the seriousness of the moral drama that each person is called to live. To deny the moral character of human nature is to deny our dignity as responsible agents, as persons capable of embracing what is truly good and rejecting evil.

This is not to deny, of course, that in many circumstances the line between good and evil can be difficult to determine. At what point may intrusive medical procedures be stopped and the patient allowed to die? What sanctions should be imposed on foreigners who have illegally entered a wealthier land to find work? What rights have the suffering and ill to expensive medications and treatments? We could easily multiply hard questions whose answers are matter for spirited and serious debate. Nevertheless, we may not deny that we have the capacity to know and understand the truth about the good and that each of us is obliged to behave according to that truth. Consider the contemporary debate over global warming. Scientific analysis presents us with the fact that the earth is warming significantly, and, projecting the consequences of this, scientists propose courses of action. It is precisely because we can understand the ecosphere and how our actions affect it that we are responsible for our decisions and actions. More generally, our understanding of the truth about our own human nature and of the world we live in makes us responsible beings. In virtue of the capacity to know the truth about the good, the human person determines himself by freely choosing his own acts. This freedom to define oneself is not arbitrary, as (for instance) Sartre proposes,²⁸ but rather consists in the capacity to direct oneself to the good as it is known by reason.

²⁶ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, §28.

²⁷ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Homily of the Mass Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice, April 18, 2005.

²⁸ See Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism.”

If from the fact that some moral questions are vexing we then conclude that moral norms are arbitrary or relative, then we have denied an essential component of our human dignity. If we say that because the human being is so thoroughly conditioned by his material nature he lacks moral freedom, then we have reduced him to a thing and denied his dignity as a person. If we say that the law or custom of the society or nation supersedes the individual conscience, then we have violated what the Vatican Council calls the “most secret core and sanctuary” of the person, where he “is alone with God.”²⁹

A grave danger of our age is that we lose sight of the *individual person's moral responsibility*, instead ascribing moral responsibility to social groups and institutions. Not only law but social custom and the pressures of “group-think” can blind the individual to the demands of conscience. The United States, which since its founding has prided itself on a commitment to the proposition that all men are created equal, has recently been badly embarrassed by revelations that prisoners were abused at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. These soldiers abandoned conscience because they believed (rightly) that those above them would approve their behavior. Pope John Paul the Great addressed this in his encyclical on the Gospel of Life, where he rejected the principle that a decision arrived at through authentically democratic procedures is always morally acceptable, because such a principle can permit—and, in the case of many of our nations and their permissive abortion laws, has permitted—a tyranny of the strong over the weak.³⁰ It is an essential mark of human dignity that the human person is morally responsible.

Our Human Destiny

The Catholic university is theistic. Atheism is not a viable option. To be sure, her scholars must study atheistic thinkers—Marx, Nietzsche, Sartre—fairly and objectively, but the institution as such cannot pretend that atheism might be true. This is a matter of simple fidelity to the truth. Because the existence of God is a supremely important fact, its denial is a supremely important error. But atheism is also problematic because it undercuts the ground of human dignity. Vatican II teaches, “The root reason for human dignity lies in man’s call to communion with God. From the very circumstance of his origin man is already invited to converse with God.”³¹ To deny the existence of the God who created us and destined us to himself

²⁹ *Gaudium et Spes*, §16.

³⁰ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, §70.

³¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, §19.

is to cut off our dignity at its root. In 1983, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn spoke starkly of the fruits of atheism:

But if I were asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous Revolution that swallowed up some sixty million of our people, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat: "Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened."³²

If the human person has a transcendent destiny, then a materialist reductionism must be false which considers him as nothing more than the accidental and interestingly complex outcome of a mindless, random sequence of organic changes guided only by natural selection. To deny this materialism contradicts no scientific finding, undermines no established theory. To affirm it, however, directly attacks the intrinsic dignity of the human person created in God's image and destined for communion with him.

For very much the same reason, the Catholic university—even as her scholars and students ponder the writings of Hume, Bentham, and Mill—must reject this-worldly utilitarianism. When lecturing on ethics at the Catholic University of Lublin, Karol Wojtyła, the future Pope John Paul II, argued that utilitarianism neglected the authentic transcendent good of the human person. "Utilitarianism," he wrote, "commits an important mistake, for it presupposes . . . a false, incomplete, disintegrated view of reality, especially of that reality with which ethics is primarily concerned, and this reality is the human being."³³ The good for the human person must transcend earthly needs and pleasures. We may recall the teaching of the Council, cited earlier, that as authors and artisans of our culture our task is to foster a new humanism, "to elevate the human family to a more sublime understanding of truth, goodness, and beauty."³⁴ Valuable and important as scientific, professional, and technical proficiency are—and the experience of every prosperous nation attests to this importance—the fostering of this humanism, a humanism directed to what is truly good for man, is even more important. In a significant work on American Pragmatism, Louis Menand comments: "There is a sense in which history is lit by the deeds of men and women for whom ideas were things other than instruments of adjustment. Pragmatism explains everything about ideas except why a person would be willing to die for one."³⁵ Address—

³² Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "Templeton Lecture," May 10, 1983. Downloaded October 4, 2007 from www.roca.org/OA/36/36h.htm.

³³ Karol Wojtyła, *Lubliner Vorlesungen* (Stuttgart-Degerloch: Seewald Verlag, 1981), 408.

³⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, §57.

³⁵ Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001), 375.

ing the metaphysical root of utilitarianism's inadequacy, John Paul the Great writes, "Utilitarianism ignores the first and fundamental dimension of good, that of the *bonum honestum*."³⁶ The Catholic university, in its teaching, research, and in the ordering of its student life, must acknowledge that the highest good, in terms of which all other goods are truly good, is God alone.³⁷

Vocation to Wisdom

In the last analysis, the Catholic university is to take seriously the Christian's vocation to wisdom. In his encyclical on faith and reason, John Paul II warns:

A philosophy which no longer asks the question of the meaning of life would be in grave danger of reducing reason to merely accessory functions, with no real passion for the search for truth.

To be consonant with the word of God, philosophy needs first of all to recover its *sapiential dimension* as a search for the ultimate and overarching meaning of life.³⁸

If skepticism is to be the contemporary academy's attitude toward truth, the notions of wisdom and "meaning of life" will be completely lost. And therefore what John Paul warns against is precisely what has happened in today's academy. Having abandoned as meaningless the question of life's meaning, we have indeed seen reason reduced to an accessory function, a means of attaining technical advantages but not of getting to the truth of things. The American pragmatist William James put this conception of reason very well when he argued, "The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. . . . Its validity is the process of its *validation*."³⁹ From this it follows that "truth" and "utility" are interchangeable concepts: "You can say of [an idea] then either that 'it is useful because it is true' or that 'it is true because it is useful.' Both these phrases mean exactly the same thing, namely that here is an idea that gets fulfilled

³⁶ John Paul II, *Memory and Identity* (Rizzoli: New York, 2005), 35. This concept of the *bonum honestum* ("fitting good") is an important concept throughout the writings of Karol Wojtyła. See Wojtyła, "On the Directive or Subservient Role of Reason in Ethics: In the Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant," in *Person and Community: Collected Essays* (New York, San Francisco, Bern: Peter Lang, 1993), 60; and *Lubliner Vorlesungen*, 186, 407.

³⁷ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §9.

³⁸ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, §81.

³⁹ William James, *Pragmatism* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1991), 89.

and can be verified.”⁴⁰ James effectively repudiates the notion of wisdom as a goal worth attaining. The point of intellectual activity is simply to make our way more efficiently through a complicated and somewhat dangerous world. This conception of reason did not originate with James, of course. John Paul II traces its roots to the Enlightenment.⁴¹ And it is an important aspect of the contemporary evolutionary materialist account, according to which the human power to reason is simply a survival advantage. Recall Daniel Dennett’s principle: “All brains are, in essence, *anticipation machines*.”⁴² Absent wisdom, it follows that our educational task would be simply to develop more ingenious techniques, technologies, procedures, and systems for developing the economy and gaining an advantage over our adversaries. This is indeed the perspective that many of our colleagues in higher education have concerning their vocation. In a recent series of columns in the *New York Times*, Stanley Fish frankly raises the question of a crisis of the humanities, the liberal arts, those studies that “improve the mind.”⁴³ The general secular concept of education is not about wisdom or improving the mind nor about passing on the cultural heritage. It is about getting marketable skills.

It has not always been so. Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* is a work in search of wisdom, in search of the ultimate causes of things.⁴⁴ This is a science that necessarily leads beyond the study of material things, indeed directly to divine things.⁴⁵ As such wisdom is the science that most befits a free man, who is one who directs his own affairs and is not directed by another. In this context it is helpful to recall the Second Vatican Council’s statement that “man is not wrong when he regards himself as superior to bodily concerns, and as more than a speck of nature or a nameless constituent of the city of man.”⁴⁶ If the human being is to rise above bodily concerns, to be more than a part of nature or the state’s whole, he can do so only in terms of his intellect. The Council Fathers write:

The intellectual nature of the human person is perfected by wisdom and needs to be, for wisdom gently attracts the mind of man to a quest

⁴⁰ Ibid., 90.

⁴¹ See Karol Wojtyła (John Paul II), “On the Directive or Subservient Role of Reason in Ethics,” *Person and Community*, 57–72, which treats of the instrumentalization of reason in the thought of both David Hume and Immanuel Kant.

⁴² Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston, Toronto, London: Little, Brown & Company, 1991), 177.

⁴³ Stanley Fish, “Think Again,” *The New York Times*, January 18, 2009.

⁴⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I, 1 981b 27–29.

⁴⁵ Ibid., VI, 1, esp. 1026a 18–32.

⁴⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, §14.

and a love for what is true and good. Steeped in wisdom, man passes through visible realities to those which are unseen.⁴⁷

Aristotle could hardly have said it better. The human being is to be master of himself, author of his own acts according to his own grasp of the truth, and this self-mastery requires wisdom. To repeat Weigel's felicitous expression of John Paul II's challenge in *Fides et Ratio*, we are called to "leave the sandbox of metaphysical and epistemological skepticism and, in doing so, to break through to a new, genuinely mature humanism" (see Weigel, p. 265).

Wisdom is ultimately a virtue, which implies that wisdom is ascribed principally and in the first instance to the individual. It is the person himself, in the final analysis, who must choose to seek wisdom and obtain it. Nevertheless, the university can foster wisdom in its faculty and students. To do so, the university must strike three vital notes: (1) reverence for tradition, (2) unity of minds and hearts, and (3) orientation to the transcendent.

Reverence for Tradition

We have been talking about Aristotle, about Plato and John of the Cross. To borrow from a recent comment by David Brooks, an American journalist, we "talk to dead people." Unfortunately, it has become common, even in our universities, to dismiss the traditional thinkers. Mathematical-empirical science has surpassed the capabilities of Aristotle's science based on the four causes. It is rare to teach Aquinas's Five Ways without some student's objecting that contemporary scientific cosmology, the Big Bang Theory, disproves his arguments. Indeed, it is not hard to find contemporary philosophers who will dismiss the concepts, themes, and projects of our ancient and medieval predecessors as irrelevant, as sophisticated folk-thinking. This is a serious error that John Paul the Great was especially concerned to refute. Although technical knowledge can indeed grow by accretion of new facts and approaches, there remains a developing wisdom that we have inherited. John Paul writes:

Although times change and knowledge increases, it is possible to discern a core of philosophical insight within the history of thought as a whole. Consider, for example, the principles of non-contradiction, finality and causality, as well as the concept of the person as a free and intelligent subject, with the capacity to know God, truth and goodness. Consider as well certain fundamental moral norms which are shared by all. These are among the indications that . . . there exists a body of knowledge

⁴⁷ Ibid., §15.

which may be judged a kind of spiritual heritage of humanity. It is as if we had come upon an *implicit philosophy*, as a result of which all feel that they possess these principles, albeit in a general and unreflective way.⁴⁸

The modern conceit is that we have a way of knowing that is utterly new, discontinuous from the ancient and medieval ways of knowing, that we can dispense with the wisdom of the ancients and be guided by the latest discoveries and theories of the empirical sciences. Such an approach is effectively a denial of the very possibility of wisdom.

Wisdom is knowledge of first principles, of the roots of being, of the natures of truth, goodness, and beauty. What we have learned from the recent history of science—I am thinking especially of the developments of relativity and quantum theories—is that the solid truths of fifty years ago may be overthrown tomorrow. Newton's mechanics were an unshakeable foundation for the knowledge of the physical universe . . . until Einstein wrote his paper in 1905. The impact of the new physics was stunning. It left scientists and philosophers of science deeply perplexed. If Newton's theory is ultimately false, then what can be true? Relativity and quanta raised fundamental questions about truth and the nature of science. But let us note well what did not happen. Science did not stop. Research in physics proceeded apace. Far from crippling the scientific enterprise, the revolutions of the first half of the twentieth century led to dramatic expansion and development of scientific knowledge. What is my point? *Even though reigning theories were shaken, science itself survived.* The scientific project, to understand the nature of reality by disciplined rational investigation, continued. What the pre-Socratic thinkers had begun, what Aristotle disciplined with his logic and physics, what the medieval logicians and theorists refined—this same project continues today. And this is John Paul II's point in the passage just quoted. Science and human inquiry in general builds upon the inheritance we have from our forebears. Francis Bacon's maxim notwithstanding, science is about more than getting power over nature. It is about understanding why things are the way they are. It is about the search for first causes of things. And physical science turns out ultimately to be a manifestation of our metaphysical impulse, of our desire for and vocation to wisdom.

And when we lose our way, becoming confused about how to think of things, we do best for ourselves by turning back to the classics, our intellectual ancestors, to get our intellectual bearings straight. We do not need all Plato's or Aristotle's answers, but we need their help to formulate the questions and to help direct our thinking.

⁴⁸ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, §4.

Unity of Hearts and Minds

“The history of all hitherto existing society,” Karl Marx famously wrote, “is the history of class struggles.”⁴⁹ And this can be applied to the history of ideas. Although the Marxist project, as Marx envisioned it, has been discredited historically, important elements of his analysis continue to influence our thought. For Marx the capitalist must think as a capitalist and the proletarian as a proletarian. Each thinks in terms of his own class interests. Similarly, men will support the advantages they have over women. White folks will regard as just social structures that support their advantages, structures that their black neighbors will resent. And so it is also with groups defined by religion, economic class, sexual identity, nationality, ethnicity, and so on. Whatever a person may say or write is a reflection of his own personal or class interest. Under the neo-Marxist paradigm, the principles of truth and justice I take to be true are simply those principles that benefit me and people like me.

In a way it was to address this kind of problem that John Rawls attempted to draft his “veil of ignorance” procedures for establishing social structures.⁵⁰ Rawls hoped to devise a system of “contentless” procedures for resolving conflicts of values. It is a project that has not worked well, and for reasons that should be clear. What is needed is not a system of procedures but wisdom. Procedures inevitably presuppose values, and values are not self-validating. (We may think, for example of the value of wealth. Although we all want wealth, it is not immediately evident how much and what kind of wealth is truly good to have.) To determine which values should govern our personal and corporate lives, we need to know what is truly good. Let us recall how the Vatican Council endorsed our studies. Our vocation is not to determine what is true and good simply for Kenyans or Vietnamese or Americans, for nations in the twenty-first century or for societies in conflict with militant Islam. Rather we seek what is universal, a “more sublime understanding of truth, goodness, and beauty” so that our reflections can “have universal value.”⁵¹

By fostering the pursuit of authentic wisdom, the Christian university transcends the divisions represented by its constituencies. This is certainly a paradoxical proposition, because scholars are a contentious lot. We argue passionately and sometimes simply for the sake of arguing. In thirteenth-century Paris, the Franciscan Platonists and Dominican Aristotelians

⁴⁹ Karl Marx, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *The Portable Karl Marx*, ed. E. Kamenka (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 203.

⁵⁰ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), esp. 136–42.

⁵¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, §57.

certainly worked hard to overcome each others' arguments. What these Scholastic thinkers also understood, however, was that the arguments were not futile. We can and must embrace the hope that the search for first principles of things—ultimately for answers to the meaning of life, as John Paul the Great put it—is not meaningless or in vain. The basis for our intellectual confidence, for this conviction that wisdom is a worthy goal, is the image of our Creator that we bear because of our rational nature. Created in his image and destined to communion with him, we do not seek in vain to conform our own minds to the order of things as they are. And this means that different as we may be in our cultural heritage and in the conditions of our lives, and however diverse may be our starting points and premises, we may nevertheless be partners in the joint pursuit of the ultimate reasons for our existence. Our commitment to pursuing wisdom is the key to the unity among diverse scholars in their manifold disciplines and from their various national, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.

Vocation to the Transcendent

Reverence for wisdom has become, almost by default, the hallmark of the Catholic university. Although our secular universities have achieved marvelous results in their research and in graduating talented students, they have abandoned—in many cases consciously—the pursuit of wisdom. The most prestigious universities in the United States are those belonging to the American Association of Universities. Here is how that Association characterizes the research university:

The *raison d'être* of the American research university is to ask questions and solve problems. Together, the nation's research universities constitute an exceptional national resource, with unique capabilities:

- America's research universities are at the forefront of innovation; they perform about half of the nation's basic research.
- The expert knowledge that is generated in our research universities is renowned worldwide; this expertise is being applied to real-world problems every day.
- By combining cutting-edge research with graduate and undergraduate education, our research universities are also training new generations of leaders in all fields.⁵²

⁵² "America's Research Universities: Institutions in Service to the Nation," White Paper of the AAU, accessed from www.aau.edu/resuniv/WhitePaper1.01.html, June 12, 2008.

The university is here to “ask questions and solve problems.” It is to innovate and apply its expert knowledge to problems in the real world. These are valuable services of course, and these are the principal reasons that our governments support higher education. Indeed, the United States Department of Education has for its mission “to promote student achievement and *preparation for global competitiveness* by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.”⁵³ Such mission statements take strong notice of the economic benefits of education, as government agencies should. But can we allow them to define our institutions? The effect of such a focus on economic development and prosperity is the fragmentation of the academy. What has economics to do with microbiology and that to do with Slavic literature or geriatric psychology?

More important still is the question of what constitutes a problem, and this calls for wisdom, for an understanding of those transcendent values toward which the Second Vatican Council urges us to look. Let us consider some cases. The United States has a significant problem with Mexicans illegally crossing our southern border in search of a better life; Botswana confronts a similar influx from Zimbabwe. Experts can analyze the social and economic effects of immigration. They can identify difficulties in the home country’s policies. They can propose solutions to the crimes and exploitation in the host country that result from illegal immigration. Seldom, however, do they ask what constitutes a “better life,” or address the question of solidarity, of whether and to what extent citizens of a richer country might be obliged for the welfare of the poor next door. Economists and political theorists do not ask how Americans might best love their Mexican neighbors. Science may analyze military, technological, and economic relationships among nations, but do such studies address the roots of the conflicts and tensions between the West and the Dar al-Islam?

As Plato taught 2,500 years ago, wisdom has to do ultimately with the good.⁵⁴ What is the good that the person lives for, that his community and society live for? This question strikes to the core of the relationship between the Moslem world and the increasingly secular West. St. Augustine distinguished the City of God from the city of man on the basis of their respective loves.⁵⁵ Ultimately *the focus of wisdom is on what we should love*, and this is a question that we all find ourselves forced, in one way or another, to ask. “One may define the human being, therefore, as *the one*

⁵³ ED.Gov, U.S Department of Education website, www.ed.gov/about/landing.jhtml?src=gu, accessed June 6, 2008, emphasis added.

⁵⁴ Plato, *Phaedo*, 97c–e; *The Republic*, VI, 508d–509b; VII, 517b–c.

⁵⁵ St. Augustine, *City of God*, XIX, 24.

who seeks the truth.”⁵⁶ Since the time of Plato, to address this question has been the task of the academy. Aristotle begins his analysis of the moral and political life by asking about the good.⁵⁷ Besides exploring the connections among visible earthly realities, the philosopher—and every Christian scholar should be a philosopher in this sense—must seek to understand their relationship with and dependence upon the perfect Good, the Author from whom they have received their being. Because we know the One who is our Creator and that our Redeemer is the Incarnate Word through whom all things were made, we may confidently explore the metaphysical foundations of the real order, knowing that our research is not in vain.

An Academic Ethos

Whenever the questions of mission, vision, and governance arise in higher education, there also arise questions of implementation, enforcement of norms, and academic freedom. If the university is theistic, what is to become of the atheists on campus? Are the biologists to submit their monographs to a committee of theologians for approval before they ship them to the publishers? If an institution holds that certain things are true and certain values to be fostered, its government must provide for the implementation and realization of these values. But if that institution is a university, which must also value academic freedom, then there seems to be a conflict. Invariably such discussions focus on rules, possible academic regulations, hiring and promotion policies, and the like. And the discussions inevitably stagnate, developing along predictably standard lines. Happily, our task here is not to propose policies as such, but simply to set out a vision. It is appropriate to note, however, that if we take seriously the Incarnation and its sacramental implications, if—following John Paul II—we develop a “theology of institutions” based upon the theology of the body, then we might discover ways to order and reorder our institutional structures such that the vision outlined here may more readily emerge. Do we need to divide the academy along the same lines we have so far? Must the academic and social lives of our students be so strictly separated? We might think creatively about the way our universities are organized and structured.

Let me propose that one practical step that can be taken immediately—putting structural and governance issues to the side for now—is to foster a distinctive Christian academic ethos, a set of values by which

⁵⁶ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, §28.

⁵⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 1.

this community lives, towards whose realization it aims. This ethos can be readily encapsulated in a simple phrase, let us say, “*the realization of Gaudium et Spes*.” The careful (or even casual, for that matter) reader of the pastoral constitution will note its recognition of the legitimate autonomy of the sciences and earthly affairs,⁵⁸ an autonomy that leaves wide open the doors of academic freedom. *Gaudium et Spes* intends to propose how the Church can serve humankind “in fostering that brotherhood of all men which corresponds to this destiny of theirs.”⁵⁹ We might put it this way: the Church has told us scholars and teachers, professors and researchers what her—which is to say our—concerns are. These are concerns that we can and should make our own for the welfare of our colleagues in the academy, for our students, and for the broader society that we serve.

St. Augustine’s famous exclamation “You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you,”⁶⁰ applies to every human person, whether he realizes it or not. This is why the mission of the Catholic university is not narrowly confessional. Almost alone in the realm of higher education, the Catholic university has the spiritual and intellectual resources to promote the new humanism that Vatican II called for. This mission, *to explore and understand the mystery of the human being and in doing so to defend his dignity and transcendent destiny as a son or daughter of God*, has this further benefit. It is a vision and a mission that every member of the university community—student, administrator, or professor—can adopt as the ideal of his work. The Council wrote:

In order for individual men to discharge with greater exactness the obligations of their conscience toward themselves and the various groups to which they belong, they must be carefully educated to a higher degree of culture. . . . Above all the education of youth from every social background has to be undertaken, so that there can be produced not only men and women of refined talents, but those *great-souled persons* who are so desperately required by our times.⁶¹

In recognizing that the human being is “the only creature on earth God has willed for its own sake,”⁶² the Christian university adopts as its governing principle the *law of love*. N V

⁵⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, §§36, 41, and 55–59.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, §3.

⁶⁰ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, I, 1.

⁶¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, §31, emphasis added.

⁶² *Ibid.*, §24.