The Ideal University

Wisdom is the principle thing; therefore get wisdom; and with all thy getting, get understanding.

Proverbs iv.7

Introduction

The university is a home for ideas, and is itself, not surprisingly, the object of much intellectual wrangling. Thinkers of all sorts -- philosophers, educators, politicians, industrialists, professors, students and parents -- have strong views about what the university is, or ought to be. Everybody agrees that universities are important, and America pours more money into higher education than any other country in the world. But supporters argue about who should teach what to whom, about who should be in charge, and who should foot the bill. They disagree deeply about the ultimate goal of a university education: should it be the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, or should it be more utilitarian, for example, to find a good job or expand the GNP? Serious writers have attempted to answer these questions since universities were first begun in the Middle Ages, and their attempts have contributed to one of the richest literatures in the philosophy of education. The readings below are chosen as an introduction to these ideas. The book falls into three parts.

Part I explores the university as an ideal institution. How should a university be defined? Is there a type of university education so important that an individual or a society should pursue it? If so, is doing so simply a matter of prudence and self-interest, or is it required by some higher moral obligation? These are an interesting questions. -- ones with implications for students choosing colleges, and for voters and politicians setting educational policy. Unfortunately there is no simple answers, but rather a set of competing, sometimes conflicting educational ideals. What is *ideal* and what *ought to be* are, however, philosophical questions -- issues in ethics and social philosophy, and answers to them call for the methods of these branches of philosophy. The readings provide excellent case studies of the kinds of arguments serious thinkers offer on important moral issues of the day.

Part II contrasts the ideal university with the brick and mortar structures that have actually been built. The ideals cannot in fact be separated from the history of individual universities founded in Europe, America and elsewhere since the Middle Ages. Variations in curriculum and organization, and above all in intellectual objectives have been driven by forces both inside and outside the university. We shall see, for example, how religion, economic structures, and legal traditions have shaped individual institutions and how these in turn have influence ideas .

The material in Parts I and II is in a sense background for the real goal of the book, bring the reader to the point of from which he or she may appreciate current debates among intellectuals on the future of higher education. Part III provides two examples of "philosophers of higher education" analyzing our current institutions and

making recommendations about the future. They have been chosen because they argue in a lively way for two quite different perspectives -- Robert Paul Wolf's is broadly liberal and Harold Bloom's conservative -- but also because they illustrate the power of the ideas developed in the earlier readings.

Part I. The Purpose of Higher Education

The selections explore the purpose of a university education. They begin with three important intellectual categories: the liberal arts, the humanities and the fine arts. They culminate with the two main positions on the goal of higher education. Is it primarily intellectual or practical. Should it be the pursuit of knowledge-in-itself or should it rather seek some more utilitarian benefit?

The section begins with two selections on the liberal arts, William Stahl's on Martianus Cappela original list of the seven liberal arts from the 5th century, and Hastings Rashdall's classic history of the liberal arts curriculum in the mediaeval university. The next topic is the humanities, represented by two selections. The Renaissance humanist Battista Gurarino sets forth the original ideal of the *studia humanitatis*, and Eugenio Garin, the modern historian of ideas, explains the moral thread that unites the tradition. Lastly, the fine arts are analyzed by Paul Oskar Kristeller who explains their rise during the Enlightenment from the status of mere crafts because of a new appreciation of aesthetic value.

The section finish with two selections by philosophers setting out the major competing positions on the purpose of higher education. In the first Cardinal Newman's presents his classical apology for the proposition that the goal of a higher education is the individual's mastering of the liberal arts for no reason other than the satisfaction of pure understanding. In the second the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset defends the university on purely utilitarian grounds, for the contributions it makes to society by serving as the repository of the higher wisdom and accomplishments of a culture. Later in Part II, in the selection from Charles Eliot, a nineteenth century president of Harvard College, we shall meet the more typically American utilitarianism that values universities because of the economic return to provide to society.

The liberal arts, the humanities, and the fine arts. The readings on the liberal arts, the humanities, and the fine arts are about these groupings as classification schemes. What is it about these classes of subjects that make they make them so important that we should have institutions like universities to teach them? The answer is not easy. Each of the groups is usually defined by a list. For example, the liberal arts were originally defined as seven subjects divided into two groups: the *trivium* made up of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and the *quadrivium* formed from arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and musical theory. The list has grown until now it embraces all the subjects of the standard arts and sciences college. The humanities too are "defined" by a list. Renaissance humanists who first invented the group placed into it only a few subjects: literature written in classical Greek or Latin, moral philosophy, and history. Sometimes they included literature written in the vernacular languages or Europe and poetry. This list too has grown. A good example of a modern version is given in the report establishing the
National Endowment for the Humanities (*Report of the Commission on the Humanities* , Washington, D.C.: American Council of Learned Societies, 1964):

> The humanities are generally agreed to include the study of languages, literature, history, and philosophy; the history, criticism, and theory of art and music; and the history and comparison of religion and law. The Commission would also place the creative arts within the scope of the Foundation.

Congress further refined this definition (Public Law 89-209, 1965):

> The term 'humanities' includes, but is not limited to, the study of the following: languages, both modern and classic; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archeology; the history, criticism, theory, and practice of the arts; and those aspects of the social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods.

The fine arts too were originally defined in the Enlightenment by a list: painting, music, dance, poetry, painting, and architecture. The list has grown to include other traditional "arts" like sculpture and architecture, and newer ones like photography, design, and maybe even MTV.

Philosophers since Socrates, however, have viewed list as very inferior definitions. In the *Euthyphro* Socrates asks his students to define piety. When they reply with a list, he points out that naming a series of individual items does not tell you why they are included in the group. A list does not explain what its elements have in common that everything else in the universe lacks. A true definition, on the other hand, would provide the "defining characteristics" of the group, the properties shared by all and only the members of the group. But what are the defining characteristics of the liberal arts, the humanities, and the fine arts? Once we find out, we may then understand why the three seem to overlap. More importantly we may be able to know whether their worth. That is, we may begin to critically evaluate claims that higher education should be devoted, at least in part, to the liberal arts, the humanities, or the fine arts.

What unifying characteristic defines the liberal arts? As explained in the selections from Cappella and Rashdall, they were originally understood in terms laid down by the philosopher Aristotle. In a famous inquiry into the nature of man, Aristotle attempted to define the species *human being*. All humans, he pointed out, are animals. But unlike other animals, humans are capable of thought. According he defined the species *man* as *rational animals*. Rationality therefore is part of what Aristotle called the "nature" or "essence" of human beings, and it is indeed the only part of human nature that is uniquely *human*. Aristotle went on to combined this view with ethics. To be "good" ore "excellent" -- the Greek's used the terms interchangeably -- consists of being a truly model example of a member of your species, a specimen that has developed the defining nature of the species as perfectly as possible. To be a good human being, therefore, is to excel as a rational animal. Being a virtuous human, as opposed to an virtuous animal or virtuous anything else, accordingly consists in developing that characteristics that is distinctively human, namely, rationality. Human virtue then consists in developing reason.

At this point the picture is made more subtle by a distinction. Aristotle points out that there are two kinds of reason. The first is practical in nature. This is the kind of

thinking we do when we perform an action. Typically our actions are motivated by a goal. The goal is usually set by our bodily needs, desires or what he calls our "appetites." Our thought processes associated with action are largely a matter of working out how to get achieve these goals. We work out rationally the best means to the end. This calculation Aristotle calls *practical reason.* The understanding we arrive at through this process he calls *practical knowledge* The varieties of ways in which we come to live in a rational manner with our desires and emotions, he called the *moral virtues*, . and excellence-at-practical-reason over all is the chief moral virtue, *prudence.* Acting for goals set by bodily needs, even actions mediated by thinking, are however something we share with animals. The term *animal* means after all a creature that "moves" and "acts for an end." Animals to some extent at least also work out how to achieve their goals. Practical reason is, therefore, not an exclusively human faculty. For that we must turn to the second type of reason. This is the sort of thinking we engage in for no practical purpose whatever but simply because we are curious about the nature of the universe. This is what Aristotle calls *theoretical reason.* Its product is *theoretical knowledge*, also known as *science*. Excellence in science is called *wisdom*, the highest intellectual virtue.

Though the conventional list of the seven liberal arts was invented long after Aristotle, in the waning days of the Roman Empire, it was intended to be a list of the theoretical sciences. Indeed, in the face of the barbarian invasions, intellectuals attempted to summarize in little manuals the highlights of ancient science so that its main points would not be entirely lost. The seven "arts" were simply headings in these summaries.

The summaries were in a way very successful. When Europe emerged from the Dark Ages and commenced to rekindle learning, it was the manuals that survived, and it was their subject headings that dictated the curriculum of the newly created universities. At their very inception, therefore, universities were established for the development of theoretical knowledge. This emphasis on theory explains how the list of liberal arts has grown from century to century with advances in science. Physics began taking its modern form in the seventeenth century, and chemistry and biology shortly after. Institutions lagged by the end of the eighteenth century these sciences had become standard liberal arts subjects at German universities -- though it took a century more for them to find a place at English speaking universities. The social sciences are more recent sciences, but they too now number among the liberal arts because of their purely theoretical aspirations.

Like the liberal arts, the humanities are more than just a list. They have an idea behind them. It too finds its rationale in Aristotle's distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge. Renaissance scholars were deeply dissatisfied with the curriculum of the liberal arts taught in the mediaeval universities, especially those in northern Europe, that stressed logic, speculative metaphysics, and theology. Theoretical subjects teach us little about moral virtues, and how to lead our daily lives in moral and upright way. But the Renaissance scholars had in their hands a new source of knowledge, the recently recovered literature of Greece and Rome. The plays, poetry, histories, and works of moral philosophy being newly edited from Greek and Latin manuscripts were treasure troves of lessons on morals. Literature continues to address these subjects, and thus modern languages are today classified in the humanities. It is because legal studies

and parts of the social sciences also shed light on the human predicament that they too are sometimes included in the as humanities, as in the act of Congress above.

Thus the humanities were originally advanced as an alternative and superior grouping to the liberal arts. The humanities were supposed to study practical action and teach moral virtue, while the liberal arts teach theory and their value is supposed to be knowledge-in-itself. In time the curriculum of universities broadened to include both the liberal arts and the humanities, in a kind of uneasy peace.

The selection by Kristeller explains how the fine arts were added to the pot. This list too has its defining characteristic. Originally, the fine arts were identified as those skills that lead to the creation of beauty, as reflected in their original name, *les beaux arts*. It soon became apparent, however, that not all valuable works of art are beautiful --some are indeed repulsive. Since the romantic period, it has been more common to use an more abstract formulation: the arts all in some important way "express the human spirit." It is generally granted, moreover, that this artistic value is not crudely practical. It addresses cultural or spiritual needs that do not lend themselves easily to monetary evaluation. In this respect the fine arts are pure like the liberal arts. To the extent, however, that the fine arts are connected to moral insight and shed light on how we should live our lives, they overlap with the humanities. Institutions dedicated to training in the fire arts eventually merged with universities to take their place with the traditional liberal arts and humanities.

The practical emphasis of the humanities and the fine arts has been joined in recent centuries by another and very important practical stream. This is technology, the direct outgrowth of applying what has been learned in the theoretical sciences to practical problems. The development of modern science has gone hand in hand with that of applied technology, and society has been quick to see the practical benefit of supporting both schools of technology and faculties of pure research that may generate even further advances in technology. Because schools of technology teach applications rather than theory, they were at first separated from universities proper -- even today there are countries in Europe in which Engineering and medicine are not taught at universities. But the modern American university is omnivorous. It combines a mixture of theoretical and practical disciplines. At the heart is the liberal arts curriculum motivated in large part by pure understanding -- the advancement of science. The humanities and the fine arts are more practical, being concerned with moral enlightenment and aesthetic expression. Technology is exclusively concerned with the practical application of theory. Fashioning a justification for a particular course of studies from these different traditions, for either an individual or a population, is a genuine intellectual problem, requiring one to balance the completing claims of thinker like Newman and Ortega.