## **Can Virtue be Taught?**

#### **Western Civilization and Moral Formation**

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Can virtue be taugh? This is of course one of the oldest questions in philosophy. It was the focus of several of Plato's dialogues, including the Meno, Protagoras and the Republic. It has also been the subject of very recent discussion: for example, literature professor Stanley Fish, *Save the World on your Own Time*. Fish's book is an attack on the pretensions of higher education, especially left-wing political correctness, but also of more old-fashioned, "liberal arts are good for soul" story.

Why is there such renewed interest in this ancient question? There is a simple answer: we are in the midst of a crisis of character in higher education, one that is reaching a level of salience that even Fishes of the world are going to find hard to gainsay. Academic cheating has reached epidemic proportions. I'm sure you've heard of the recent scandal at Harvard.<sup>2</sup> Students there don't even have the excuse that good grades are hard to earn -- close to 50% of all grades at Harvard are A's or A-'s.<sup>3</sup>

- In 1993, a survey conducted by the Center for Academic Integrity reported that 70% of college students admitted to having cheated on tests.
- 87% admitted to having plagiarized writing assignments. An entire industry has developed for the ghostwriting of essays and theses.
- 33% admitted to cheating in eight or more courses.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Stanley Fish, Save the World on Your Own Time (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Richard Pérez-Peña and Jess Bidgood, "Harvard Says 125 May Have Cheated on an Exam," *The New York Times*, August 30, 2012, A18.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Ross Douthat, "The Truth about Harvard," *The Atlantic*, March 1, 2005.

- In a Josephson Center survey in 2002, 39% of college students said that they would be willing to lie to get a good job.
- "Stanford University said today that its teaching assistants' handbook section on plagiarism had been plagiarized by the University of Oregon. Oregon officials conceded that parts of its handbook were identical with the Stanford guidebook."

This last point includes an iconic event, revealing that mere expertise in the code of behavior does not suffice to produce ethical results.

Let's imagine that we have been charged with the task of founding a new college (Magnesia College), recruiting a faculty and a student body, and designing both its curriculum and its extracurricular life.

Should we aim at teaching virtue? Can virtue be taught at the collegiate level? If so, how?

I'm going to draw primarily from four sources: John Henry Newman (1873),<sup>5</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien (1939),<sup>6</sup> Russell Kirk (1965, 1978, and 1986).<sup>7</sup> In the sections below, I will do the following five things. First, starting with the principle of Hippocratic medical ethics -- first, do no harm -- I will consider how higher education can actively promote vice. What, as founders of Magnesia, must we avoid? Second, I will criticize the idea of morally neutral higher education, of the sorts

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> "Plagiarism Book is Plagiarized," *The New York Times*, June 6, 1986.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius Press, 2010).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *The Monsters and the Critics* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), pp. 109-161.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Russell Kirk, *The Intemperate Professor* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University, 1965); *Decadence and Renewal in the Higher Learning* (Gateway, 1978); "Introduction," in Irving Babbitt, *Literature and the American College* (Washington, D.C.: National Humanities Institute, 1986).

defended recently by Stanley Fish and by Anthony Kronman.<sup>8</sup> Third, I will consider the case that education cannot teach virtue. Fourth, I will examine the question of what can realistically be achieved: i.e., what is a realistic aim for the design of higher education in respect of moral formation. Finally, I will lay out some concrete ideas about how to teach virtue

### I. First do no harm. How higher education can school in vice.

Colleges and universities are today actively undermining all of the moral virtues. We've replaced in loco parentis (colleges acting in the 'place of' the parents in promoting good character) to in loco satani. Let's look at the traditional seven deadly sins, and see how all are promoted by the modern university.

- 1. Sloth: grade inflation and the lack of high standards. In a recent book, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa document that students spend only half as much time studying now as they did a generation ago. Students report doing no more than thirteen hours a week studying -- and we have good reason to suspect that this self-reporting exaggerates the actual work being done.
- 2. Gluttony: drunkenness and the use of recreational drugs. There is a strong correlation between low standards, poor work ethic, and the dominant 'party school' ethos.
- 3. Lust: condom distribution and the active encouragement of the "hook-up" culture. In 1992, then University of Texas president Bill Cunningham objected to the addition of condom vending machines on every floor in every dorm, complaining that it would make the dorms look like "cheap motels". He soon backed down: the juggernaut of sexual permissiveness crushes any dissent.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Anthony T. Kronman, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

Many universities follow Yale's example with officially sanctioned Sex weeks, filled with pornography, lectures on varieties of sexual techniques, and the promotion of 'responsible' sex -- which used to be known as fornicatiton. The *Vagina Monologues* are almost a permanent institution. Course offering increasingly reflect an obsession with sexual transgression (transgressiveness) as a kind of moral ideal. Today's rebels without a cause are encouraged by their teachers to rebel against traditional sexual mores as revolutionaries for the cause of human liberation.

Art departments privilege obscene art, including sexualized performance art, and programs in counseling, social work and clinical psychology make frequent use of pornography in the classroom as a way of 'desensitizing' students to perversity.

4. Avarice. College admission offices contribute to avarice by selling higher education primarily as a means to higher income and greater consumption. Is there an eighteen-year-old in the country who hasn't heard that those with bachelor's degrees earn an extra million dollars over a lifetime?

In order to compete for a shrinking pool of potential students, universities have been turning student dormitories into Club Med vacation spots, with opulent dorms and recreational facilities.

Dishonesty has always been associated with avarice. Today's colleges enable cheating by the use of mechanical grading, by lax enforcement, and by the absence of a strict honor code.

Universities also model avarice and injustice in their employment structure. The research university depends on the exploitation of an academic proletariate: a body of non-tenure-track lecturers and adjunct professors who earn half the pay of professors, do twice the work, and enjoy no job security. These unfortunate wage-slaves teach 60% of the student-hours at very low cost, in order to divert tuition and state aid to subsidize administrators, and politically favored

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Nathan Hardan, Sex and God at Yale: Porn, Political Correctness, and a Good Education Gone Bad (New York: Macmillan, 2012).

'researchers'. Ironically, the one place that a Marxist analysis of the economy accurately depicts reality is within the Marxist-dominated university.

Finally, avarice is encouraged by the extreme stratification of young people that results from hyper-selective admissions policies at elite universities. This stratification results in the creation of a technocratic elite, who have little in common in relation to culture, shared history or religion, and who are bound together only by the common pursuit of power and wealth.

5. Wrath. The humanities and liberal arts are focused almost entirely today on the topic of the victims of oppression, where the oppressors are always white, Christian, straight American males. A recent NAS study demonstrated that the teaching of American history at the Univ of Texas and Texas A&M is dominated by the unholy trinity of race, class and gender (with class actually a distant third). The race-class-gender theory demonizes capitalism, America, religion, white privilege, patriarchal family, and Republicans. It promoste a Manichaean view of the world: they are evil, we are good, fueling perpetual anger in students toward their imagined enemies.

This undying indignation is also encouraged by the various ethnic studies programs, diversity administrators, and the de facto re-segregation of the campus through "ethnically themed" dormitories and lounges.

6 and 7. Envy and Pride. We know well that higher education promotes intellectual snobbery. In the pursuit of social prestige, the highly educated seek to differentiate themselves from the unwashed masses by distancing themselves from traditional culture, beliefs, and moral norms. The promotion of pride is a real danger, even when higher education is done quite well. Higher education can encourage and strengthen the human tendency toward pride. This is one of the themes of John Henry Newman in *The Idea of a University*: Discourse VIII, "Learning Viewed in Relation to Religion".

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Ashley Thorne, Peter Wood, and Richard W. Fonte, *Recasting History: Are Race, Class and Gender Dominating American History?* January 10, 2013 (www.nas.org/articles).

"[Liberal learning] may be from the first nothing more than the substitution of pride for sensuality." Today - it is the promotion of pride with sensuality, or even through sensuality.

Newman refers to the emperor Julian the Apostate as a paradigm of the philosopher's or gentleman's religion, understood as the prideful rejection of divine revelation. As Newman notes:

"Basil of Caesarea and Julian were fellow-students at the schools of Athens; and one became the Saint and Doctor of the Church, the other her scoffing and relentless foe." <sup>13</sup>

We can identify five philosophical sources of vice in the modern academy: secularism, utilitarianism, naturalism, relativism and political Manichaeanism.

A. Militant secularism. Making a religion of natural reason and natural virtue, to the exclusion of a supernatural dimension of grace, revelation. This was Newman's primary concern in Discourse VIII.

"The educated mind has a religion of its own, independent of Catholicism, partly co-operating with it, partly thwarting it; at once a defence yet a disturbance to the Church in Catholic countries." <sup>14</sup>

"Right Reason, that is, Reason rightly exercised, leads the mind to the Catholic Faith, and plants it there, and teaches it in all its religious speculations to act under its guidance. But Reason, considered as a real agent in the world, and as an operative principle in man's nature, with an historical course and with definite results, is far from taking so straight and satisfactory a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Newman, p. 141.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Newman, p. 161.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Newman, p. 137.

direction. It considers itself from first to last independent and supreme; it requires no external authority; it makes a religion for itself."<sup>15</sup>

We can't realistically expect secular universities, especially state universities like the University of Texas, to promote any particular form of supernatural religion However, institutional neutrality on this question need not take the form of active hostility. Let me give you a historical example of what I mean.

The University of Texas throughout most of the twentieth century had an arrangement known as the Bible chairs. These were instructors appointed and paid by various churches; Baptist, Church of Christ, Methodist, Catholic, and so on. The Bible chair holders were authorized to offer courses on the Bible and the Christian religion on campus, for credit. This was a perfect solution, very much line with Thomas Jefferson's intentions for the University of Virginia. However, the University of Texas administration was embarrassed by them, so it colluded with the State's Attorney General, who issued a binding opinion in the early 90's ruling that the Bible chairs were unconstitutional. The private money that had funded the Chairs was successfully transferred to a new "Religious Studies" department, which is explicitly anti-theological and open to all religions (as long as they aren't traditional Christianity). The surviving courses on the Bible take the usual faith-busting form, following the "Jesus Seminar" in arguing that the New Testament accounts of Jesus and his words are unreliable products of "creative writing" by later communities, i.e., nothing more than a kind of science fiction by committee.

B. The idea of a purely utilitarian, technical education (which has its origins in the technological pragmatism of Francis Bacon).

By neglecting ethical questions, such an education subtly conveys contempt for virtue.

C. Naturalism, materialism, the rebirth Epicurean metaphysics.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Newman, pp. 137-8.

On this view, our conscience is at best: a kind of moral 'sense', as James Q. Wilson described it. <sup>16</sup> Unlike the five senses, materialists deny that there are any facts to which the "moral sense" can give us access. Consequently, morality has no real authority: it is ultimately only of instrumental value. We can always tell our genes to go 'jump in the lake', as Stephen Pinker puts it. <sup>17</sup> If I don't care about the perpetuation of the human species as such, why should I care about respecting a 'moral sense' whose only function is biological?

#### D. Relativism, historicism, or conventionalism.

These theories share the thesis that morality is nothing more than a contingent social construction. Morality lacks any transcendent or super-human authority. The notion of morality as possessing some kind of rational or universal authority and validity is merely an illusion. These philosophies encourage students to hold moral traditions iin contempt, and they tempt students to aspire to become supermen, beyond good and evil, anticipating an imagined future instead of perpetuating a discredited past.

This kind of relativism can also lead to a form of parochialism. Once we give up on any universal standards or transcendent ends, we are enslaved to the fashions and fanaticisms of our own time and place. As post-modernists like to put it, "Truth is whatever my colleagues will let me get away with." This applies to moral truth, as well as to narrowly academic questions.

This moral relativism follows inevitably in the wake of materialistic metaphysics, and the secular and utilitarian approach to human life. If the world of fact is a world of blind physical motion, then there is no basis in reality for a genuine ethical norm. If such norms are to exist, they must be our arbitrary creation.

# E. Political Manichaeanism, Gnosticism.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense* (New York: The Free Press, 1997).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Stephen Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (London: Norton, 1997).

Once this view, all that matters is having progressive opinions, political allegiances. Mere bourgeois morality is unimportant, potentially an obstacle. Saul Alinsky's Rules for Radicals is a great example of this. This philosophy is at once moralistic and thoroughly immoral.

Nature abhors a vacuum – once the first four forces drove serious attention to universal moral norms from the world of the mind, political Gnosticism rushed in to take its place. Human beings cannot live without some sense of transcendent purpose – when they are denied the satisfaction of that need through religion and morality, they will attach themselves instead to political ideology.

Russell Kirk identified this deformation of the scholar in his introduction to Babbitt's classic, *Literature and the American College*:

"The scholar is left an intellectual in the root sense of that Marxist term: an adventurer, an ideologue, alienated from society and gnawing at society's roots." <sup>18</sup>

In an essay Kirk published in 1987 entitled, "Can Virtue be Taught?" he wrote:

"Intellectual virtue divorced from moral virtue may wither into a loathsome dung. Robespierre was called by his admirers 'the voice of virtue'; certainly Robespierre (who justified the slaughter of his opponents by coining the aphorism that one can't make an omelet without breaking eggs) was forever prating of virtue. 'Virtue was always in a minority on the earth,' said that murderous prig,.... Intellectual virtue, genus Robespierre, is a kind of delusory ethical snobbery, ferocious and malicious, annihilating ordinary human beings because they are not angels." <sup>19</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Russell Kirk, "Introduction," in Babbitt, p. 66.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Reprinted in *The Essential Russell Kirk*, edited by George A. Panichas (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2007), pp. 383-393, ad 386-7.

### **II. Against Morally Neutral Education**

Next, I'd like to examine two recent defenses of the ideal of the university as the domain of the morally neutral pursuit of purely academic ends. This neutralism can take either of two forms: academic parochialism (Stanley Fish), secular humanism (Anthony Kronman).

Fish takes the parochial perspective: academia should be devoted to the criterionless, foundationless, non-rational perpetuation of academic sub-cultures. Fish's approach is, culturally speaking, a dead end. What Fish recommends is exactly what the humanities have been doing over the last century – turning more and more inward, becoming a closed, perfectly self-referential system of academic arguments over abstruse theories of interpretation. Such closed system having nothing to offer to or to attract the neophyte: the training they provide is value only internally – it bakes no bread (has no practical or utilitarian value), and it does not pretend to be of intrinsic value, in any way enriching the quality of one's life. This kind of parochial and nihilistic schlolasticism is doomed to extinction in the very near term. It has successfully driven away generations of students from the humanities, students who have drifted by default into business schools and other forms of vocational training.

Anthony Kronman, former dean of Yale's Law School and currently the strongest supporters of Yale's great books program, Directed Studies, defends the secular humanist ideal.<sup>21</sup> On this view, students are encouraged to seek ethically and personally significant knowledge, truth for truth's sake, and colleges are to encourage this by directing students to read the great books, chosen purely on grounds of intellectual merit, evaluated from a morally, religiously, politically and philosophically neutral perspective.

This approach has roots in the University of Chicago, Columbia in the 1920's and 30's. Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler, leaders of reform at Chicago, defended the ideal in a spirited

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Fish 2008.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Kronman 2007.

fashion. It has taken hold at the St. John's Colleges, and in about thirty other colleges and programs around the country, including well-known programs at Yale and Notre Dame.

As Kronman describes the approach, the secularist humanist curriculum addresses the big questions, but without any presumption about what are the right answers. This is a noble and in many ways admirable attempt to revive a sense of higher purpose, but it is ultimately both intellectually and practically incoherent. Kronman presumes that truth, or at least the rational pursuit of truth, is of intrinsic value. But this is not a neutral starting point.

Let me illustrate this by reference to Leo Strauss, the great political theorist of the mid-century who has been a major source of inspiration for the secular humanist ideal. Strauss taught that philosophy was an endless quest for wisdom, a journey that never reaches its destination, in the sense that philosophy, by its very nature, never presumes to claim any permanent or secure possession of the truth.

At the same time, Strauss insists that philosophy is an integral way of life, a form of life that resolutely affirms the value of philosophy as supreme and non-negotiable, a value above all others. However, this is evidently an inconsistent position. Strauss cannot both deny that philosophy affirms any truth about value, and then insist that it does affirm the supreme value of philosophy itself.

The position of moral neutrality is also *practically* incoherent, for two reasons. First, it is impossible to evaluate the intellectual merit of texts or teachers without any presumption about the larger truths of human nature and the relative value of various goods. Eloquence and technical correctness in logic or dialectic are not sufficient criteria. The ravings of a lunatic can be eloquent and logical, even hyper-logical.

Second, we can't separate the intellectual from the moral virtues. Pursuit of truth requires courage, prudence, temperance, justice and charity (toward fellow conversants, both living and

dead). Virginia Woolf made this point quite compellingly in her book on education, *Three Guineas*, arguing that true scholarship is forever in need of intellectual chastity and purity.<sup>22</sup>

The practical incoherency of secular humanism has moral and philosophical implications. It is intellectual subpar, and potentially deceptive and manipulative, to pretend to students that the pedagogy and curriculum are morally and philosophical neutral, when the fact is they cannot be.

### III. Answering Plausible Arguments that Moral Virtue cannot be Taught

I would now like to consider and answer four plausible arguments for the thesis that moral virtue cannot be taught.

A. Morality is a matter of the will or feelings, not of the intellect. What is crucial for the formation of good character is family life and person habituation to virtue, not schooling.

Russell Kirk, puts this case quite well in his essay, "Can Virtue be Taught?" (1987):

"Socrates argued that virtue and wisdom at bottom are one. When first I read Socrates' argument, I being then a college freshman, this seemed to me an insupportable thesis; for we all have known human beings of much intelligence and cleverness whose light is as darkness. After considerable experience of the world and the passage of more than four decades, to me Socrates' argument seems yet more feeble.

In other words, moral virtue appears to be the product of habits formed early in family, class, neighborhood..."<sup>23</sup>

Kirk then turns to the example of the experience of ancient Rome:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (New York: Harcourt, 1963).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Kirk 2007, p. 385.

"Although the high old Roman virtue was not altogether extinguished until the final collapse of Romanitas before the barbarian wanderers, by the time of Nero and Seneca there had come to exist, side by side, a fashionable array of ethical teachings, derived from Greek sources-and a general decay of public and private morals, from the highest social classes to the lowest. This Roman experience seems to justify the argument of Aristophanes that virtue cannot be taught in schools. Rather, the sprig of virtue is nurtured in the soil of sound prejudice; healthful and valorous habits are formed; and, in the phrase of Burke, 'a man's habit becomes his virtue."

There is, without doubt, a large element of truth to this. C. S. Lewis makes the same point in *The Abolition of Man*:

"I had sooner play cards against a man who was quite skeptical about ethics, but bred to believe that 'a gentleman does not cheat', than against an irreproachable moral philosopher who had been brought up among sharpers." (A 'sharper' is British slang for a confidence man.)

It is true that one who has been badly brought up (as Aristotle observed) cannot attain a good character – at least, not without some radical intervention of divine grace. However, this does not mean that education is irrelevant to the moral development of 18-25 year olds who were decently brought up.

First of all, the will is guided (to some extent, and in the long run) by the intellect. Humans are to some degree rational and free -- not entirely controlled by feelings or passions. Philosophy does make a difference: recall Dr. Johnson's advice, open hearing that one of his guests denied the reality of a difference between virtue and vice: "When he leaves our houses, let us count our spoons."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Kirk 2007, p. 386.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Harper One, 2009), p. 24.

And secondly, good education can build upon and strengthen wholesome moral sentiments, and bad education can undermine them. Education can, through poetry and story, affect the heart as well as the mind.

B. Rote learning of moral truths is not sufficient for good character.

True. One can memorize the 'right' answers without being really persuaded. Hypocrisy is always an option. Nonetheless, instruction can play an important role. It can contribute to virtue even if it is not, by itself, a sufficient condition for it.

And hypocrisy is not necessarily the worst outcome. As La Rochefoucauld has said, "Hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue." In a fallen world like ours, widespread hypocrisy is therefore a good sign, a sign that virtue is in the position of strength, the position from which is can extract tribute from vice. I would gladly trade the morally debased culture of our idea, with all of its glorification of disordered sexuality and rampant narcissism, for a world with twice or three times the amount of hypocrisy of the Victorian era.

Finally, as we shall see, a curriculum that is directed to the formation of moral character involves much more than the rote memorization of sage advice or Polonius-like maxims.

C. At the university level, students will not simply absorb moral truths through instruction, as in a catechism class. They must reach the right conclusions on their own steam.

Yes, but this process of discovery can be guided, or as Socrates put it, Midwifed, by teachers and by the college curriculum as a whole. We can reasonably aim at aiding students in their moral self-development through a combination of directed reading and philosophical dialogue.

D. Theological objection. True virtue requires the infusion of divine grace. Only God's Word and the sacraments can undo the damage of original sin. Given the fall, any 'natural virtue' is merely magnificent vice, as St. Augustinian describes the virtues of the ancient Romans in The City of God. Thus, what is needed is not education but conversion.

This argument, although sound up to a point, ignores certain theological subtleties. Human nature and free will are not utterly destroyed by the Fall. Even the 'magnificent vices' of unredeemed human nature can constitute a kind of preparation for the Gospel, the removal of obstacles in the form of the sordid vices of sloth, gluttony, lust, and avarice. God's grace perfects nature.

It is true, as I've already conceded, that the more subtle, spiritual sins of envy and pride are harder nuts to crack. Indeed, higher education, even at its best, has a tendency to stoke the tinder of intellectual pride and social envy. Even here, however, it is possible to encourage intellectual humility through salutary doses of Socratic skepticism, deflating the pretensions of reason to achieve truth on its own, as well as by leaving space in our students' lives for the intrusion of grace.

#### IV. What can be achieved: realistic aims for higher education

Two things can be accomplished:

- 1. We can inculcate intellectual virtue, which is a great good in itself, and the pursuit of intellectual virtue provides opportunities for exercising moral virtue.
- 2. We can form gentlemen through the induction of a broad, Liberal Knowledge

First, we should recognize that intellectual virtue is also a form of virtue. Morality is not everything – Newman's Liberal knowledge is a good in its own right.

Newman, again:

"That perfection of the Intellect, which is the result of Education... is the clear, calm, accurate vision and comprehension of all things, as far as the finite mind can embrace them, each in its place, and with its own characteristics upon it... it has almost the beauty and harmony of 15

heavenly contemplation, so intimate is it with the eternal order of things and the music of the spheres."<sup>26</sup>

"The objectors ...assume, [that liberal education's] direct end, like Religious Knowledge, is to make men better; but this I will not for an instant allow... for I consider Knowledge to have its end in itself.... Its direct business is *not* to steel the soul against temptation or to console it in affliction."<sup>27</sup>

Newman warns us against a totalizing or reductionistic moralism. Such moralism can easily lead again to spiritual pride, the sort of Phariseeism that Jesus warns against in the Gospels: "Lord, I thank you that I am not a sinner like other men." An emphasis on the good of the intellect, which is unbounded and unattainable, can help sustain a healthy degree of humility and self-doubt. The great trick is to sustain this proper self-doubt without inculcating relativism, anti-intellectualism, and philosophical despair. This in turn requires a delicate balance between the acknowledgement of the attainment of certainty on settled principles and the recognition of the finitude and fallibility of human judgment and the weakness of human endurance in the face of temptation.

B. As Cardinal Newman explained in *The Idea of a University*, a university can't make saints, but it can make gentlemen (and gentlewomen):

"Knowledge, the discipline by which it is gained, and the tastes which it forms, have a natural tendency to refine the mind, and to give it an indisposition, simply natural, yet real, nay, more than this, a disgust and abhorrence, towards excesses and enormities of evil...This fastidiousness, though arguing no high principle, though no protection in the case of violent temptation, nor sure in its operation, yet will **often or generally** be lively enough to create an absolute loathing of certain offenses, or a detestation and scorn of them as ungentlemanlike, to which rude natures... are tempted or even betrayed."<sup>28</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Newman, pp. 104-5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Newman, pp. 90-1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Newman, p. 142.

Newman goes on to describe "A series of influences which intellectual culture exerts upon our moral nature,... manifesting themselves in veracity, probity, equity, fairness, gentleness, benevolence, and amiableness; so much so, that a character more noble to look at, more beautiful, more winning, in the various relations of life and in personal duties, is hardly conceivable..."<sup>29</sup>

#### Newman concludes:

"Liberal Education makes not the Christian, not the Catholic, but the gentleman. It is well to be a gentleman, it is well to have a cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid, equitable, dispassionate mind, a noble and courteous bearing in the conduct of life; -- these are the connatural qualities of a large knowledge; they are the objects of a University... but still, I repeat, they are no guarantee for sanctity or even for conscientiousness, they may attach to the man of the world, to the profligate, to the heartless..."

Thus, Newman warns us both against expecting too much, and against expecting too little, from the moral effects of liberal education.

#### V. How can we teach virtue?

We can teach moral virtue in three ways:

- A. We form moral virtue in a closeknit community of high aspirations.
- B. Moral wisdom can be enriched through philosophical wisdom.
- C. Liberal education can deepen and strengthen the moral imagination.

# A. The formation of a community of high aspirations

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Newman, p. 144.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Newman, p. 91.

Moral virtue is fostered by a community that has high aspirations, expressed both in the curriculum and in extra-curricular activities. The better colleges (such as Davidson or William and Mary) incarnate this aspiration in an Honor Code, with students holding each other to high standards, and with no tolerance of dishonesty.

Aspiration is crucial. When forming moral community, we cannot ignore the curriculum. The shape of the curriculum has an unavoidable *expressive* function. We express our aspirations or lack of aspiration by what we include or exclude from the curriculum.

B. Practical wisdom can be enriched through philosophical wisdom. There is a central tradition within Western philosophy of core truths about the cosmos and human nature.

Some of these core truths include:

- That the Life of virtue is true happiness.
- That God exists, and that human beings have dignity by virtue of having been created in God's image.
- That the cosmos is an intelligible creation of a benevolent God.

We must convey certain key ideas: true vs. false happiness, pleasure as a fallible indicator of happiness, human nature as inherently teleological: ontologically ordered to an objective goodness, human nature as fundamentally rational and truth-seeking, natural law and the common good. Informative moral philosophy can provide what St. Thomas Aquinas calls the 'preambles of faith', orienting us toward the good of religion (unity with God), opening the door to faith.

A survey of the Philosophical Great Tradition will include the following works:

Plato's *Gorgias* and *The Republic*Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* 

Cicero's Republic and On Obligations

Augustine's Confessions

Boethius's Consolation of Philosophy

Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, especially part I-II on happiness and the will Bishop Joseph Butler's *Five Sermons on Human Nature* 

C. S. Lewis, The Abolition of Man

We must not omit the dissenters from the tradition: Plato's *Protagoras*, Macchiavelli, Hobbes, Hume, Nietzsche, and Freud. There is wisdom and truth even in error. The truth of original sin is reflected in the insights of Macchiavelli. Hume makes us painfully aware of the limitations of human reason, especially when cut off from the community and tradition. Nietzsche can help us clear the cant of egalitarian liberalism from the mind, and Freud is surprisingly strong on the social importance of sexual self-contol.

Good professors can model the harmony of reason and faith. Grace perfects nature: it doesn't destroy it. Reason and faith are the two wings of the human spirit, as John Paul II put it in *Fides et Ratio*.

We cannot refute the philosophical errors of the day. There is no intellectual silver bullet that will slay the dragons of materialism, hedonism, scientism and relativism. However, we can make students aware of an alternative. We can demonstrate that this alternative is rationally scientifically respectable and defensible.

We can draw out, for example, the philosophical implications of the quantum revolution. The threat of determinism and reductionism, that seemed overwhelming in 1900, with the dominance of the Newton-Maxwell model of particles and rigorous laws of motion, has been completely destroyed by the quantum revolution, which has more and more pushed a simplistic materialism beyond the pale of credibility.

C. Finally, Liberal education in great literature can deepen and strengthen the moral imagination.

Edmund Burke introduced the idea of the moral imagination in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*:

"All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd and antiquated fashion.

On the scheme of this barbarous philosophy, which is the offspring of cold hearts and muddy understandings, and which is as void of solid wisdom as it is of all taste and elegance, laws are to be supported only by their own terrors...."

Kirk defined the moral imagination as "that power of ethical perception which strides beyond the barriers of private experience and momentary events." Kirk also described it as "the power to conceive of men and women as moral beings – something more than creatures with animal wants." <sup>32</sup>

John Gardner explains the connection between art and the moral imagination:

"Real art creates myths a society can live instead of die by, and clearly our society is in need of such myths. What I claim is that such myths are not mere hopeful fairy tales but the products of careful and disciplined thought; that a properly built myth is worthy of belief, at least tentatively; that work at art is a moral act; that a work of art is a moral example; ad that false art can be known for what it is if one remembers the rules. The black abyss stirs a certain fascination, admittedly, or we would not pay so many artists so much money to keep staring at it." <sup>33</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Russell Kirk, "The Moral Imagination," in Kirk 2007, p. 207.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Russell Kirk, "Introduction," in Babbitt, p. 43.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (New York, 1978), p. 126.

In contrast, according to Kirk, "A depraved literature reflects a growing depravity in society generally; but also it nurtures that larger depravity and defiantly attempts to justify it." <sup>34</sup> T. S. Eliot, elaborates on the dangers of perverse art in his "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1932):

"One error, in fact, of eccentricity in poetry is to seek for new human emotions to express; and in the search for novelty in the wrong place it discovers the perverse. The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all..."

Imagination -- going back to Kant and Coleridge -- is not just a faculty for picturing that which is absent or unreal. It is the faculty by which we perceive anything at all: by which we from the blurring and booming confusion of our sensations into images of reality. Good art, including poetry and fiction, can strengthen this faculty, enabling us to perceive more deeply and accurately the reality around us. By the moral imagination we are enabled to see more than just the physical or empirical facts. We can perceive spiritual and moral realities: the dignity of the human being, the beauty of character, the ethical demands of a concrete situation, the social and cultural continuities that tie us to the past and the future.

The authors in the twentieth century who were most successful at inspiring the moral imagination were the so-called Inklings of Oxford: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Owen Barfield. C. S. Lewis spoke of the 'baptism of his imagination' through reading the imaginative fiction of George MacDonald.

J. R. R. Tolkien delivered a wonderful lecture on this subject in 1939, "On Fairy-Stories". According to Tolkien, fantasy can enable us to perceive reality more clearly, sharpening and strengthening our faculties. His own work is a great example. The Lord of the Rings is a classic of world literature, by far the greatest work of the 20th century, and worthy to be ranked alongside Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Russell Kirk, "Introduction," in Babbitt, p. 54.

According to Tolkein, true 'Fantasy' is "the achievement of the 'inner consistency of reality'". It achieves freedom from the "domination of observed 'fact'". "To make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief, will probably require labour and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft." <sup>35</sup> Tolkien included in his lecture a poem in which he expressed his defense of the 'sub-creation' by which he and other fantasists sought to inform the moral imagination. The poem was entitled, "Mythopoeia":

'Dear Sir,' I said — 'Although now long estranged, Man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed. Dis-graced he may be, yet is not de-throned, and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned: Man, Sub-creator, the refracted Light through whom is splintered from a single White to many hues, and endlessly combined in living shapes that move from mind to mind. Though all the crannies of the world we filled with Elves and Goblins, though we dared to build Gods and their houses out of dark and light, and sowed the seed of dragons — 'twas our right (used or misused). That right has not decayed: we make still by the law in which we're made.

"We make still by the law in which we're made." God's creation is an act of the moral imagination, and Tolkien's sub-creation of a new world was a making that quite intentionally participated in those divine laws of moral and spiritual truth through which God made us.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Tolkien, pp. 139-140.

Tolkien insists that fantasy strengthens our ability to perceive the real world, by enabling us to "recover" our natural aptitude for a clear view of things:

"Fantasy is a natural human activity. It certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason.... we need recovery. We should look at green again, and be startled anew (but not blinded) by blue and yellow and red. We should meet the centaur and the dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep, and dogs, and horses – and wolves. This recovery fairy-stories help us to make. In that sense only a taste for them may make us, or keep us, childish....

"Recovery (which includes return and renewal of health) is a re-gaining – regaining of a clear view. I do not say 'seeing things as they are' and involve myself with the philosophers, though I might venture to say 'seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them' – as things apart from ourselves. We need, in any case, to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity – from possessiveness....

"And actually fairy-stories deal largely, or (the better ones) mainly with simple or fundamental things, untouched by Fantasy, but these simplicities are made all the more luminous by their setting.... It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of the things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine."

Tolkien responds to the inevitable charge of "escapism":

"In what the misusers of Escape are fond of calling Real Life, Escape is evidently as a rule very practical, and may even be heroic.... Why should a man be scorned, if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it. In using Escape in this way the critics have used the wrong word, and what is more, they are confusing, and not always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter. ... Not only do they confound the escape of the prisoner with the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Tolkien, pp. 146-7.

flight of the deserter; but they would seem to prefer the acquiescence of the 'quisling' to the resistance of the patriot....

"For my part, I cannot convince myself that the roof of Bletchley station is more 'real' than the clouds. And as an artefact I find it less inspiring that the legendary dome of heaven. The bridge to platform 4 is to me less interesting that Bifröst guarded by Heimdall with the Gjallarhorn. From the wildness of my heart I cannot exclude the question whether railway-engineers, if they had been brought up on more fantasy, might not have done better with all their abundant means than they commonly do."<sup>37</sup>

Tolkien defends the archaism of his fantasy:

"I do not think that the reader or maker of fairy-stories need even be ashamed of the 'escape' of archaism... For it is after all possible for a rational man, after reflection, to arrive at the condemnation... of progressive things like factories, or the machine-guns and bombs that appear to be their most natural and inevitable, dare we say 'inexorable', products.... Our age is one of 'improved means to deteriorated ends'."<sup>38</sup>

Kirk agrees with Tolkien on the moral potential of literary studies:

"The aim of the oldfangled college education was ethical, the development of moral understanding and humane leadership; but the method was intellectual, the training of mind and conscience through well-defined literary disciplines. A college was an institution for the study of literature: it was nearly so simple as that. Through an apprehension of great literature young men were expected to fit themselves for leadership in the churches, in politics, in law, in the principal positions of leadership in their communities."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Tolkien, pp. 148-9.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Tolkien, p. 150-1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Russell Kirk, "Introduction," in Babbitt, p. 63.

Russell Kirk expounds on the same theme in "Can Virtue be Taught?":

"In no previous age have family influence, sound early prejudice, and good early habits been so broken in upon by outside force as in our own time, Moral virtue among the rising generation is mocked by the inanity of television, by pornographic films, by the twentieth-century cult of the 'peer group'...

"And how were such young persons schooled in virtue? They were required to read carefully, in the classical languages (chiefly in Latin), certain enduring books that dealt much with virtue. In particular, they studied Cicero, Vergil, and Plutarch, among the ancients. They memorized Cicero's praise of virtuous Romans; they came to understand Vergil's labor, pietas, fatum; they immersed themselves in the lives of Plutarch's Greeks and Romans 'of excellent virtue' – men in whom the energy of virtue had flamed up fiercely."

In contrast, Kirk bemoaned the modern-day cult of relevance, typified by the "Department of Effective Living" at my alma mater and Kirk's one-time employer, Michigan State University, in the 1970s. Kirk rejected all forms of simplistic moral didacticism, form Horatio Alger to *Heather has Two Mommies*. This didacticism has been reborn in recent years through the "virtue of the month approach", promoting such anodyne and vapid "values" as responsibility, compassion, the "social" conscience, "social" justice, and tolerance. Kirk again:

"Apologists for this aspect of life-adjustment schooling believe that they are inculcating respect for values by prescribing simple readings that commend tolerant, kindly, co-operative behavior. Yet this is no effective way to impart a knowledge of norms: direct moral didacticism, whether of the Victorian or the twentieth century variety, usually awakens resistance in the recipient, particularly if he has some natural intellectual power."

Kirk uses Saki's "The Story-Teller" as an instructive example. In the story, a mischievous bachelor tells an "improper" story to three children – a story about an unctuously good girl who

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Kirk 2007, p. 214.

receives medals for her good behavior. The jangling of her medals leads a wolf to her, resulting in her being eaten eaten. The children's aunt calls this "a most improper story to tell to young children." Kirk insists that the best stories – the stories that most strengthen the moral imagination – are often "improper" stories.

Here are some of these best stories that the curriculum at Magnesia College must include:

Dante's Divine Comedy

Chaucer's Canterbury Tales.

The Arthurian legends, especially Gawain and the Green Knight

Greek and Norse myths

Tolkien's legendarium, including The Lord of the Rings

Homer's *Odyssey* 

Virgil's Aeneid

The plays of Shakespeare, especially some of the historical plays (*Henry IV*), comedies (*Much Ado about Nothing*), tragedies (*Merchant of Venice, Julius Caesar, Macbeth*).

Sir Walter Scott's Waverly novels

William Faulkner's novels

Short stories by Flannery O'Connor

T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets

Russell Kirk concludes his introduction to Babbitt on an optimistic note:

"In the dawning era of the twentieth-first century, it may be an ancient orthodoxy, or the great works of Greece and Rome, that come to seem original. It may be that the recovery of norms will seem more exciting than surrender to the perverse. It may be that the third century of the American Republic will grow into a regenerate Augustan age. It may be that chastened modes of thought will produce a fresh literature."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Kirk, "Introduction," in Babbitt, p. 61.