The Crisis of the Humanities and the End of the University

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John Henry Newman begins his *Idea of a University* by claiming that the university “is a place of teaching universal knowledge.”¹ But instead of referring to “universal” and all inclusive as Newman suggests, the word university was originally derived from the medieval Latin sense of universitas, meaning “a society, company, corporation, or community regarded collectively.”² Newman’s effacement of the corporate origins of the university in favor of universality reflects a transformation of the university in the course of the 19th century from a corporate body with particularist interests to one with a claim to an autonomous universality transcending all particular localities, prejudices and traditions.

The connection between the university and universality has remained dominant up to the present. Frank M. Turner notes that “no alternative rhetoric has succeeded in substituting itself for Newman’s in the sphere of public discourse on higher education.”³ In an earlier discussion of higher education, for example, Pierre Bourdieu claims that intellectuals “have constituted themselves as they are in and by their rejection of particularisms. By proclaiming themselves defenders of the universal or, as Husserl said of philosophers, as ‘functionaries of humanity,’ they have somehow committed themselves, by means of a kind of collective oath, to a model

of the universal intellectual.”

Because the knowledge produced at universities is held to be objective and universal, academics claim to provide for society a moral center protected from the prejudices of sectarian religious and political interests as well as from instrumentalization by a technocratic government and a capitalist economy. “The struggle for autonomy is thus, first and foremost, a struggle against those institutions and their agents which, from within their disciplines, introduce dependence with regard to external economic, political and religious powers.”

Faced with these outside powers threatening to functionalize all of society, universities provide “havens for useless knowledge, i.e., knowledge lacking immediate socio-political instrumentability.” The pure pursuit of knowledge becomes the activity which guarantees the spiritual vitality and the moral authority of the university, and the critique of the university is a critique of its abandonment of universality in favor of narrow practicality: “Thus today tenure and its pursuit exclude as a dispensable luxury or waste of time the very possibility of dealing with universality, in favor of a narrow technicization of thought and knowledge.”

From this perspective, “the spiritual crisis of the university coincides with that of the humanities.” The humanities offer an intellectual space in which knowledge is pursued for its own sake and all practical interests are kept at bay. Based on this neutral perspective, the humanities implemented “[t]he university’s noble task of providing society its self-consciousness” which, however, “today has fallen victim to the general demise of symbols and the university’s institutional lack of spirit.”

Present-day defenders of university autonomy perceive the decline of the humanities as part of a general decline of culture in favor of instrumentalization.

The “culture wars” debate began as the realization by multiculturalists that the humanities as they were being taught in the US were not neutral and free of external interests, but were in fact being used to support a particular system of values based in a Western tradition. By revealing the particularity of the values motivating the teaching of the humanities, the

5. Ibid., p. 105.
multiculturalists threatened the objective and neutral stance which legitimated the university’s role as an expensive producer of “useless knowledge.” But if the universities could no longer claim a higher, objective ground from which to look down upon and criticize the sectarian and materialist world around them, then their status and claim to resources would be drastically reduced. They would no longer be able to derive “their authority from the unwritten laws of ethical and scientific universalism in order to practice moral leadership and, on occasion, to instigate collective mobilization in the battle to extend the values of their particular fields [sic] to all of society.” They would lose the moral authority with which “intellectuals asserted their right to transgress the most sacred values of the collectivity . . . in the name of values transcending and superseding parochial ones.”\(^10\) In fact, a radical multiculturalism which conceives of the humanities as a producer of particular rather than universal values threatens the entire basis of knowledge in which, “since the Renaissance, intellectual judgment has replaced divine judgment, and intellect as such has assumed all the godly attributes of spirit.”\(^11\)

Maybe the idea of universality has only served to hide how the underlying “gild” character of the medieval university remains the basis of the “professionalism” of the modern university. If this is the case, the decline of both university autonomy and the humanities may only reflect the demise of a particular notion of culture which has used the idea of universality to legitimate its hegemony. In place of the myth of universality, higher education could be returning to a more democratic determination of the particular relation between knowledge and values.

Multiculturalists never attempted such a thorough-going critique of the university, nor did they challenge the universalist claims of the humanities. Instead, they limited themselves to a critique of the Western culture curriculum in order to offer a more “objective,” multicultural basis for university education. They continued the old humanist project by replacing the Western culture curriculum with a multicultural one in order to render it more cosmopolitan. Yet by opening up humanities education to a political dimension which had hitherto been suppressed in the name of universalism, their critique has coincided with a much deeper critique of the humanities that has been reflected in declining enrollments but only sporadically articulated, most vociferously by the religious Right. As Frank M. Turner has noted: “Both the religious and secular critics seek to


\(^{11}\) Heinrich, *op. cit.*, p. 95.
find or impose a wider framework of truth or understanding within which the university and its activities should function.”

University intellectuals like Turner generally attack such attempts at imposing a “wider framework of truth” as a sign of “new provincialisms” and “exclusionist tendencies” which “constitute the xenophobic mentality of the small town located far from the major metropolis, where wider learning, excitement, and opportunity abound.” Turner’s defense of the liberal arts is typical in that it views the humanities as the last refuge for a vision of knowledge which still holds to a notion of universality transcending narrow prejudices, petty politics and a venal materialism. But as recent critics of the Enlightenment have insisted, knowledge is never universal nor value-free. It is always particular and value-laden, dependent on prejudice and tradition for its very existence. Using arguments developed by David Hume, Edmund Burke, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Alasdair MacIntyre, John Tate has shown that “reason is defined by its conditional reliance on a prior evaluative context of tradition. To the extent that reason cannot critically evaluate its own preconditions, it lacks autonomy and cannot provide the basis of its own legitimacy.” A prior context of values is necessary for knowledge to constitute itself, and the attempt to separate knowledge from values merely obscures the prejudices which underlie its construction.

The contemporary claims for universality and university autonomy form part of a theory of knowledge which permeates the structure of the modern university. Established in the course of the 19th century, it presupposes an Enlightenment understanding of knowledge which has only succeeded in replacing one value system for another as the basis of knowledge while hiding the fact that the new value system is just as particular and prejudicial as the former one. Though most histories have described this transformation of higher education as progress toward the universalism and objectivity of the modern university, recent research has taken an alternative view, suggesting that the move from particularity to universality as the organizing principle of the university has in fact

been only an historical phase marked by an increasingly secular, nation-state determination of university affairs which replaced an earlier denominational and local control.\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{Early American Colleges}

As opposed to the present system in which the research university has become the dominant model, American higher education from the colonial period up until about the time of the war between the states consisted almost exclusively of schools based on the English college model, though, as Hofstadter and Metzger outline, there were three important differences which separated American colleges from their English counterparts.

First, the lack of concentration of population and capital in America made it impractical to organize colleges together into a university, and in America the colleges were scattered throughout the country rather than clustered. This characteristic was often seen as the primary advantage of the American college system. “Theron Baldwin, the ‘Father of Western Colleges,’ noted in 1854 that: ‘It is one of the glories of American colleges, that they are not concentrated into one vast University, but scattered far and wide among the people; each one filling its sphere, availing itself of local associations and local sympathies, and standing up there as the visible and ever present representative of liberal and Christian learning.”\textsuperscript{17} Another 19th century commentator noted with satisfaction that the local character of colleges meant that they were brought “into closer connection with the wants and wishes of the people.”\textsuperscript{18}

Second, the religious pluralism of American culture led to a diversity in the college system in which each college was controlled by one of a variety of religious denominations. With the exception of a handful of state schools, the overwhelming majority of American colleges before the war between the states were under the control of one of 15 different religious denominations,\textsuperscript{19}


\textsuperscript{18} W. S. Tyler, \textit{Colleges: Their Place Among American Institutions} (pamphlet, 1857), pp. 9, 11 and 26, cited in Tewksbury, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 5.

\textsuperscript{19} Tewksbury, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 90.
and every college was defined by both its proximity to a particular locality and its affiliation with a particular denomination.

Third, as opposed to European universities based on a model of professorial self-governance, each American college was governed by a board which consisted of members of the outside community. Though they disapprove of such community control because it threatens to impair academic freedom, Hofstadter and Metzger show how the characteristics of Protestantism led to this democratic and anti-elitist structure of the college. “American Protestants did not consider that they were destroying intellectual freedom by extending the policy of lay government from churches to colleges. Indeed they considered it one of their contributions to civilization that they had broken up the priestly autonomy of advanced education and had brought it under the control of the community.” This community control was mediated primarily through the churches. “Religious concerns determined the structure of higher education. Most colleges had official ties to a religious denomination, and many were controlled by boards of trustees dominated by ministers. College presidents (and many of the faculty) were typically ministers. Ministerial control guaranteed that knowledge of God’s creation was properly interpreted in light of divine revelation.” Similarly, Tewksbury notes not only that “our colonial colleges were largely religious in origin and character” but also that, “with the exception of a few state universities practically all the colleges founded between the Revolution and the Civil War were organized, supported, and in most cases controlled by religious interests.” When the governing boards were not made up strictly of members of one religious denomination, other denominations were represented based on their influence in the local community.

The type of education was more similar to that of a secondary school or a German Gymnasium than to that of a university. The students generally lived in dormitories, as in England, and were subject to strict discipline.
Each school day began and ended with compulsory chapel, and the prescribed curriculum before the war between the states “consisted chiefly of studies in Latin, Greek, mathematics, logic, and moral philosophy, with occasional smatterings of Hebrew and rather elementary physics and astronomy.” The point of the curriculum was not to prepare students for further study nor to inculcate a sense of American identity, but rather to provide an education grounded in specific moral assumptions for future clergymen and public servants. Accordingly, the professors did not conduct research and were usually recent graduates who were themselves waiting to find positions as ministers.

The training of ministers remained a primary goal of college education until the war between the states. “Within a sample group of representative institutions, a little more than one half the graduates became ministers at the opening of the 18th century; by 1761 about 37 percent; and by 1801, about 22 percent. The religious revivalism of the early 19th century and the decline of Enlightenment radicalism brought the figure back to a little more than 30 percent by 1836, but another long period of decline soon began which brought the figure to about 20 percent in 1861, 11 percent in 1881, and 6 percent in 1900.” Because they were generally founded in order to train ministers, virtually all colleges in this period were affiliated with one of the various religious denominations. Even the state institutions founded at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century soon became dominated by a religious denomination.

Knowledge in colonial colleges until the mid-18th century was clearly subordinate to religious revelation. As Mark Noll points out concerning this period: “A student, in the words of Harvard’s earliest set of ‘Rules, and Precepts,’ was to ‘be plainly instructed, and earnestly pressed to consider well, the maine end of his life and studies is, to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternall life . . . and therefore to lay Christ in the bottome, as the only foundation of all sound Knowledge and Learning.’ The result was wholistic education which gave nature its due while reserving the essential framework, in both personal lives and academic

28. Ibid., p. 7.
29. “In most cases, the control of these supposedly secular, public institutions was captured by sectarians.” Brubacher and Rudy, op. cit., p. 147.
instruction, for grace.”30 All knowledge was subordinate to the moral framework dictated by religious revelation, and even those students who did not plan to become ministers naturally accepted this framework as well.31

**Universal Knowledge**

Beginning in the two decades immediately preceding the American Revolution, the religious particularity of American colleges was slowly being eroded by ideas from the Enlightenment and a nascent nationalism. From the early dependence on a surrounding community and religious traditions, colleges began the process of transformation into places of “universal” knowledge. This change began as a revision of the relation between faith and knowledge: “where Puritan education had proceeded from a Christian perspective which sought to dominate the shape, purposes, and structure of learning, leaders in America’s Christian colleges after the Revolution allowed truths of the didactic Enlightenment to lay out the shape, purposes, and structure of knowledge within which they were delighted to find a place for Christianity.”32 Rather than conceiving of all knowledge as a consequence and outgrowth of a pre-existing religious perspective, the idea of universal knowledge began to gain ground. According to this view, rather than acting as the foundation of knowledge and therefore existing prior to the pursuit of knowledge, sacred truths and ethics began to be taken as a part of knowledge itself, which could be debated and researched as if they were part of the material world.

The legitimacy of this universalist perspective on higher education slowly gained ground in the course of the 19th century. “In an article, ‘The Nobility of Knowledge,’ published in 1874, Harvard chemistry professor Josiah Cooke pronounced that ‘all truth is one and inseparable.’

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31. “That students planning for secular lives, notably for public leadership, would go to the college [17th century Harvard] was undoubtedly expected, but no one thought that their interests required a different curriculum from those of future clerics. . . . It may be a just summation to say that while Harvard’s purposes were not conceived to be secular — since nothing was entirely secular in a Holy Commonwealth — they were not entirely ecclesiastical. It was also implicitly understood that the teaching in the college would be committed to the doctrinal orthodoxy of the New England Congregational Way; and if no formal tests or oaths of conformity were imposed, it was not because conformity was not expected but because the community was at the beginning so homogeneous in religious conviction that such requirements were felt to be superfluous.” Hofstadter and Metzger, *op. cit.*, pp. 83-84.

Cooke did not need to explain or defend this statement; he was simply repeating a truism of his age. In the nineteenth century educated Americans believed in the ideal of the ‘unity of truth.’ The unity of truth entailed two important propositions. First, it supposed that all truths agreed and ultimately could be related to one another in a single system. Second, it assumed that knowledge had a moral dimension. To know the ‘true,’ according to this ideal, was to know the ‘good.’ The crucial assumptions in this theory of knowledge are that all knowledge exists objectively as a unified system even prior to human conceptualization and that ethics and the sacred must be conceived as forms of knowledge not qualitatively distinguishable from other forms of knowledge such as physics or history. A divine reality and a mundane reality exist on the same plane within a totality which can be gazed upon imperially by the subject. Describing the Cartesian and Ramist roots of this transformation in relation to the divine, Catherine Pickstock writes that “space becomes a pseudo-eternity which, unlike genuine eternity, is fully comprehensive to the human gaze, and yet supposedly secure from the ravages of time.” The foundation of knowledge was no longer the revealed truth of a particular religious perspective, but the totality of the world itself, which was presumed to contain everything, including ethics and the sacred, within a unified, homogeneous space subject to human conceptualization.

**Knowledge and Values**

This view of knowledge received its articulation as a vision of the university with John Henry Newman’s attempt in Great Britain to distinguish and separate a secular tradition of knowledge from a sacred one. Though the main goals of Newman’s lectures were to retain theology as an essential discipline at universities and to maintain universities primarily as teaching rather than as research institutions, the growing acceptance of his main argument for the separation of knowledge from values tended, ironically, to undermine rather than support these goals, thereby establishing the basic distinction of the research culture according to which American universities would be organized during the 20th century.

Newman separates secular from sacred knowledge in order to respond to scientists who wish to discredit theology on the basis of natural scientific

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laws. He insists that both natural science and theology have their own proper fields of vision, and neither has the right to trespass on the field of the other. The typical consequence of this Kantian argument, which the natural scientist often cites, is that theology can say nothing about hypotheses developed, for instance, in physics in order to give a physical explanation of the world. Newman argues that the natural scientist often falls into error by ignoring the corollary — namely that the natural scientist can say nothing about the metaphysical world. The physicist’s insights are only hypotheses regarding physical mechanics and not facts about reality as such. The moment the physicist presumes to give an exhaustive explanation of the facts of reality, he or she has crossed over the boundary and intruded into disciplines like philosophy and theology. A natural scientist’s argument against the efficacy of prayer must then be considered an attempt to deny the existence of any facts not purely physical (for instance, the existence of God) and consequently to make unjustified judgments concerning a metaphysical reality: “if a people prays, and the wind changes, the rain ceases, the sun shines, and the harvest is safely housed, when no one expected it, our Professor may, if he will, consult the barometer, discourse about the atmosphere, and throw what has happened into an equation, ingenious, even though it be not true; but should he proceed to rest the phenomenon, in matter of fact, simply upon a physical cause, to the exclusion of a divine, and to say that the given case actually belongs to his science because other like cases do, I must tell him, *Ne sutor ultra crepidam*; he is making his particular craft usurp and occupy the universe.”

Newman’s separation of sacred from secular knowledge is meant to defend the former from encroachment by secularist scientists. But he pays a high price for this strategy. With the acceptance of a separation of secular and sacred knowledge into two separate but equivalent spheres, he must also accept an idea of universal knowledge which detaches secular knowledge from the values of the sacred sphere. Newman then presumes that knowledge can be pursued in isolation from a pre-existing value system: “Knowledge is capable of being its own end.” He defends this notion of knowledge by appealing to an ideal of “liberal arts” in which knowledge is pursued and obtained as a free intellectual exercise independent of practical applications, and he compares liberal learning to recreational pursuits such as sports activities and hobbies. Like a strong and healthy body, intellectual development is valuable in itself: “Manly

games, or games of skill, or military prowess, though bodily, are, it
seems, accounted liberal; on the other hand, what is merely professional,
though highly intellectual, nay, though liberal in comparison of trade and
manual labour, is not simply called liberal, and mercantile occupations
are not liberal at all. Why this distinction? because that alone is liberal
knowledge, which stands on its own pretensions, which is independent of
sequel, expects no complement, refuses to be informed (as it is called) by
any end, or absorbed into any art, in order duly to present itself to our con-
templation.”37 This view of knowledge as a liberal pursuit separates it
from both practical and moral purposes: “for I consider Knowledge to
have its end in itself. For all its friends, or its enemies, may say, I insist
upon it, that it is as real a mistake to burden it with virtue or religion as
with the mechanical arts.”38

In his idea of knowledge for its own sake, Newman accepts the possi-
bility of an objective knowledge unencumbered by any presuppositions
which derive from a moral or religious sphere. This seeming independence
of knowledge from values depends on his view that science is a matter of
constructing a model of the universe which corresponds to the true original.
As he put it, “all knowledge forms one whole, because its subject-matter is
one; for the universe in its length and breadth is so intimately knit together,
that we cannot separate off portion from portion, and operation from opera-
tion, except by a mental abstraction.”39 In such an endeavor, each disci-
pline deals with a piece of the puzzle in which the whole corresponds to the
universe. This representational model of science can only function if one
assumes a static universe in which it exists like a single finished work
directly accessible to an independent and sovereign intellect. In this model,
the totality of knowledge coincides with the totality of the subject’s gaze
rather than the totality given by a divine perspective.40

Within this framework, the division of knowledge into separate disci-
plines is a necessary human construct resulting from the finite capacity but
unlimited scope of the human gaze. Though humans cannot in practice
perceive the entire truth of the world at once because of their limited
lifespan, the idea that the universe is an objective and universal whole
directly accessible to human understanding means that such a cognition of

37. Ibid., p. 81.
38. Ibid., p. 89.
39. Ibid., p. 45.
40. For a discussion of the subjective gaze as the epistemological foundation of
knowledge in modernity, see Pickstock, op. cit., pp. 47-88.
the whole is in fact possible given enough time. The separation of the disciplines functions as a division of labor allowing progress toward the final cognition of the whole of the universe. An understanding of the totality could be achieved by relating all the disciplines to each other.

Since objective and universal truth, according to this view of knowledge, can be attained through the effort to exhaustively map out the universe until everything has been known, this unity can exist prior to any determination of values. This possibility of “value-free” knowledge determines the role of theology at the university. In his argument for the necessary inclusion of theology as a field of study in the university, Newman argues that theology is an essential element of the totality of human knowledge and cannot be excluded from university education without distorting the whole: “if the various branches of knowledge, which are the matter of teaching in a University, so hang together, that none can be neglected without prejudice to the perfection of the rest, and if Theology be a branch of knowledge, of wide reception, of philosophical structure, of unutterable importance, and of supreme influence, to what conclusion are we brought from these two premises but this? that to withdraw Theology from the public schools is to impair the completeness and to invalidate the trustworthiness of all that is actually taught in them.”41 Newman argues that, since the disciplines are not competent to decide values, the inclusion of theology at the university is necessary to provide the moral grounding for the pursuit of knowledge. Theology’s task is to inquire into the metaphysical values which would otherwise be missing at the university. Theology and only theology should carry on such discussions, but by the same token theology’s influence on the university must be limited to its establishment as a department amongst others.

Because he relies on a notion of universal knowledge in which all learning is an approach toward the one truth of a universe including both material and moral truth, Newman does not recognize that all knowledge already presupposes an ethical dimension. By claiming to be able to detach this dimension from knowledge and place it in a department of theology, his ideal of liberal learning subordinates theology to a totality determined by the gaze of the subject and isolates the disciplines from an overarching theological viewpoint. Since a practical and ethical framework is implicit in every decision to pursue a particular topic of research, the banishment of all conscious consideration of values to theology departments means that Newman’s approach can only function with the

assumption that all members of the university community share a commitment to a basic set of values determined by the theologians. But Newman himself undermines this unity of values by dividing knowledge into a secular and a sacred tradition, creating a dual system of values, each with its own independent dynamics. For Newman, the development of science and literature has followed a progressive and objective course toward truth in secular knowledge during the history of mankind which parallels the progression of sacred truth in the history of Judeo-Christianity. These two developments are independent, and it is only coincidental that the development of Western civilization — the only true “Civilization” — occurred in the same general geographical area and time span as the development of Judeo-Christian religions, “the only true religion.”

This separation of secular from sacred knowledge already assumes a secular framework for constructing the totality of knowledge in which both the secular and the sacred exist on the same plane of experience. While the sacred had previously functioned as a metaphysical determination of the structures of knowledge, it must now be consigned to a finite position within a larger framework determined by the subject. By separating secular from sacred knowledge, Newman’s idea of universal knowledge reproduces the epistemological foundation of a secular understanding of the university. Though framed as an argument for theology’s indispensability, Newman’s claim that it is possible to pursue knowledge for its own sake merely paves the way for the secularization of the ethical dimension of knowledge at the university. Since all knowledge is dependent on some type of pre-existing values in order to constitute itself at all, when Newman ignores this context and attempts to maintain the simultaneous validity of both a sacred and a secular tradition, he is in fact subordinating theology to a secular framework. Though he argues for an insertion of Catholic theology into the university, the role he assigns theology of merely staying within its designated sphere without attempting to influence research and teaching in other fields allows secular learning to determine its own value orientations independent of theology.

In using Newman’s model of the university, American higher education has found it all too easy to accept his view of liberal learning, on the one hand, and then exclude theology from the university, on the other. This development is not a misuse of Newman’s ideas, but was a result of the contradictions inherent to them. By arguing that secular culture forms a unified whole that can be traced in the progress of the “Civilization” which

developed around the Mediterranean basin, Newman established the idea of a secular humanist tradition. This idea cannot exist alongside but can only replace a religious totalization of knowledge which would form the basis for understanding the world as a part of a divine rather than human totality. When Newman assumes that the totality exists in the things themselves and will reveal itself with the increasing progress of both secular and sacred knowledge, each in its own sphere, he is in fact abandoning the hope of maintaining a sacred totality which suffuses all knowledge.

This complicity in the banishment of a religious perspective from the university becomes clear when one compares his view of culture with that of Matthew Arnold, who takes a similar view that Western civilization is the site of a steady progress toward a universal truth. The only difference between their two visions of culture is that, while Newman views the secular tradition as without ethical content and maintains that its pursuit can only be justified as the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, Arnold maintains that a moral imperative necessarily attaches to the development of secular culture: “As I have said on former occasion: ‘It is in making endless additions to itself, in the endless expansion of its powers, in endless growth in wisdom and beauty, that the spirit of the human race finds its ideal. To reach this ideal, culture is an indispensable aid, and that is the true value of culture.’ (Arnold, A French Eton, 1864)”


Culture is not valuable as an end in itself but only as part of the continuing march toward human perfection. Indeed, for Arnold the consideration of an activity as an end in itself reduces that activity to mere machinery. “The moment we disjoin [bodily health and vigour] from the idea of a perfect spiritual condition, and pursue them, as we do pursue them, for their own sake and as ends in themselves, our worship of them becomes as mere worship of machinery, as our worship of wealth or population, and as unintelligent and vulgarising a worship as that is.”

As we have already seen, Newman’s separation of secular from sacred culture depends on the idea of universal knowledge on which the modern university is based. The attempt to separate knowledge from values only succeeds in suppressing sacred values in the construction of knowledge in order to make way for an alternative value system to provide the organizing structure which knowledge needs in order to constitute itself. By positing a secular tradition, Newman already sets up the values which Arnold
uses to defend this secular tradition as a replacement for a religious tradi-
tion as an ultimate value system: “In thus making sweetness and light to be
characters of perfection, culture is of like spirit with poetry, follows one
law with poetry. Far more than on our freedom, our population, and our
industrialism, many amongst us rely upon our religious organisations to
save us. I have called religion a yet more important manifestation of
human nature than poetry, because it has worked on a broader scale for
perfection, and with greater masses of men. But the idea of beauty and of a
human nature perfect on all its sides, which is the dominant idea of poetry,
is a true and invaluable idea, though it has not yet had the success that the
idea of conquering the obvious faults of our animality, and of a human
nature perfect on the moral side — which is the dominant idea of religion
— has been enabled to have; and it is destined, adding to itself the relig-
ious idea of a devout energy, to transform and govern the other.” With
the advance of culture to the level attained in 19th century England,
Arnold perceives religion as another form of machinery, a means which
remains subordinate to poetry as the final apotheosis of human culture.

The major problem with this understanding of culture is not so much
that it ethnocentrically privileges European culture, but that it privileges
written texts over oral ones, preserved relics over living human interac-
tion. This textual tradition tries to replace oral traditions and ritual prac-
tices in determining ethics, university professors gradually becoming the
priests of this cultural order. This abstract, text-based culture no longer is
grounded in particular communities or congregations in which ritualized
human interaction determines ethics, but in an abstract textual world. The
attempt to ground culture in texts only succeeds in allowing another force
from outside the texts to create the unity of a textual tradition.

**The Rise of the University**

The growing acceptance in the 19th century of the separation of secu-
lar from sacred knowledge espoused by Newman prepared the intellectual
climate in the U.S. for the introduction of the German model of the
research university, whose structures were initially established by Wil-
helm von Humboldt in the first decade of the 19th century. From the very
beginning, Humboldt’s model was based on the subordination of educa-
tion to the interests of the state. In contrast to the early proliferation of
separate institutes for different specializations, which characterized
research in the 18th century, Humboldt not only unified teaching and

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research at the University of Berlin but also sought to consolidate the separate institutes into one. His plan for the university established not only the institutional but also the moral framework in which knowledge would serve the interests of the Prussian state.

In the US, Humboldt’s model of the research university replaced a system of higher education which was not based on the interests of the state but on local and denominationally-defined communities. The primary goal of the earlier college system was to maintain a particular denominational perspective on knowledge. But the desire to develop a Congregationalist or Presbyterian view of the world did not simply arise out of petty sectarian disputes as historians of education such as Hofstadter and Metzger claim. Denominational college education was based on a theory of knowledge that understands it as always value-laden rather than value-free and a theory of culture which sees its locus in human interaction rather than in a set of texts. In such colleges, a religious denomination integrated knowledge and the disciplines into a moral and metaphysical framework which existed outside the college as the Congregationalist (Harvard and

46. “The great advance over and the decisive difference from the previous century’s idea of the university was that the new university had the task of unifying teaching and research in close interaction, whereby knowledge was not only to be transmitted but also produced. The disciplines were also to function in close interaction to embody anew the universitas literarum, in contrast to the common 18th century practice of supporting particular branches of science in separate institutes.” Siegfried A. Kaehler, Wilhelm v. Humboldt und der Staat: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte deutscher Lebensgestaltung um 1800, 2d ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963), pp. 231-2.

47. “It was in this respect that the superiority of German science, which he praised to Madame von Stael from Rome, seemed to him to be guaranteed. He saw in it a promotional force for the home state, which, in supporting and protecting science ‘would be able to have the most decisive intellectual and moral influence on the cultivation of the entire linguistically unified nation.’ This influence was not to be pursued for the sake of the ‘pure idea.’ Humboldt recognized that the university, in contrast to an academy, ‘was more intimately bound to the interests of the state.’ From this fact he concluded that ‘Prussia, in place of its earlier possession of great political power, should now gain a moral one’ — a thought which seemed to be related to the ‘founding words’ of Friedrich Wilhelm III, but of course less realistically conceived and more directly targeted toward that cultural significance in the world which he referred to already in 1808. And there is no doubt that the University of Berlin fulfilled Humboldt’s idea and provided for the Prussian state in its slow rise to the leadership of the German people an irreplaceable moral or, more clearly and precisely phrased, spiritual comradeship.” Kaehler, op. cit., p. 232.

48. Hofstadter and Metzger, op. cit., pp. 115-119, 209-222. Reuben notes that, though Hofstadter “depicted the antebellum college as narrowly sectarian and repressive in its piety . . . more recent scholarship has challenged this view and depicted the colleges as broadly ‘Christian.’” Reuben, op. cit., p. 276, n. 14. Actually, both depictions have some truth to them. Though these colleges retained their sectarian character, the growth of the idea of “unitary truth” had already begun to homogenize education.
Yale) or Presbyterian (Princeton) or Baptist (Brown) or Anglican (King’s College, later Columbia) church. Consequently, the dependence of the colleges on private funding from these churches was an expression of their rootedness in values and needs in the outside community. Religious pluralism led to a “multicultural” environment in which public funding of colleges would have meant the privileging of one religion over the others, leading to its eventual establishment as a state religion.

The secularization of colleges in the US and the federal funding of higher education established the humanities as this secular religion. By taking religion out of the college, educators claimed to be freeing knowledge from outside prejudices and unwarranted interventions. But this supposedly neutral religious stance laid the groundwork for the development of a secular culture which was to supplant the prior diversity of religious cultures. The attempt to turn religion into a purely private matter, having no bearing on the production and transmission of knowledge, had the effect of suppressing the different denominational perspectives on knowledge in favor of a unified, secular culture which supported the interests of the federal government.

This culture was established in two ways: on the one hand, through the attempt to maintain the neutrality of the university in matters of culture by defining value decisions as a private matter (as Charles Eliot did at Harvard in the late 19th century), and on the other, in the 20th century, through the development, by administrators such as Robert Hutchins at the University of Chicago, of a unified “liberal arts” curriculum designed to integrate all individuals into the values and culture of American citizenship. W. B. Carnochan argues that the current canon debates are simply a continuation of earlier conflicts between “modern” educators, such as Eliot, who advocated a free elective system, and traditionalist opponents.

49. As Hofstadter and Metzger note, early proponents of toleration were merely using the idea as an excuse to advance the interests of a sectarian group that happened to be in the minority. This was the case, for example, with Joseph Noyes at Yale in the 1750s, [see Hofstadter and Metzger, op. cit., pp. 170-1] and with William Livingston, who published in 1753 a series of essays in support of non-sectarian education at King’s College, but “seems to have been more concerned with making certain that there should be no college controlled entirely by Anglicans than with insuring that there would be a liberal college controlled without regard to sect.” Ibid., p. 187. In any case, Livingston’s proposals sought to transfer control of the college from private trustees (a large majority of whom were typically ministers from one denomination) to the state legislature, demonstrating that non-sectarian meant in practice domination by the government. Though Hofstadter and Metzger claim that such early examples of the defense of toleration prepared the way for the later development of academic freedom, these examples seem better suited to showing how the idea of academic freedom has always functioned as a cover for sectarian and political interests.
such as Matthew Arnold, Irving Babbitt and Robert Hutchins, who developed the great works canon based on Western history and literature.\footnote{W. B. Carnochan, \textit{The Battleground of the Curriculum: Liberal Education and American Experience} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 1-21 and 38-50.}

In reading the history of curriculum battles since the late 19th century as a conflict between the free elective system and the development of a Western civilization curriculum, Carnochan and other defenders of a multiculturalist curriculum attempt to vindicate the idea of knowledge for its own sake as a way of maintaining a neutral stance in questions of culture while still defending the humanities. According to the multiculturalists, this position has the double advantage of preventing education from becoming either a purely vocational undertaking or a kind of propaganda for religious or nationalist interests. The particular attraction of Newman’s perspective thus lies in the fact that he, on the one hand, supports the liberal arts against the “servile” vocational arts, but on the other does not make any claims concerning the liberal arts’ ability to promote a private or public morality.\footnote{Newman, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 89-91.} “In American higher education, the twentieth century has belonged in large part to Arnold’s followers, who have grafted onto Eliot’s evolutionary model of the university a contrasting model that sanctifies the idea of a harmonious, secure, and politically stable culture. At the same time, Newman’s Catholic humanism, though not much reflected in curricular wars, still appeals to skeptics who resist equally the cultural religion of Arnold, on the one hand, and the scientific religion of the research university, on the other.”\footnote{Carnochan, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 50.} Following Newman, Carnochan can defend the humanities against vocationalism while opposing the ethically based adherence to a Western canon (as advocated by Matthew Arnold and Irving Babbitt) and similar arguments by religious sects for maintaining denominational control over higher education. Since university knowledge is not to be pursued for practical purposes, it can supposedly remain free of such moral imperatives.

But in developing this perspective, Carnochan fails to see how Newman’s and Arnold’s positions are actually two sides of the same coin of secularization. They in fact functioned together to establish a national culture. The dichotomy between Newman’s ideal of knowledge for its own sake and Arnold’s moralistic defense of the Western tradition, pursued today as the opposition between multiculturalists and cultural conservatives, is a false one. The establishment of a national, secular culture replacing a prior
diversity of local, religious cultures was not simply the result of the particular decisions made by American educators to promulgate a Western culture curriculum. Rather, the very idea of knowledge as secular and value-free brings with it a colonizing perspective which seeks to eradicate all other cultures by claiming that they are sectarian and prejudicial rather than neutral and objective. The humanist ideal of supplanting local cultures with a national one is a direct consequence of attempts to separate a knowledge deemed universal from sectarian, particularistic values.

This connection between the idea of universal knowledge and the interests of the nation can be seen in the history of higher education in the US. The rise of the American research university was made possible by increased funding from business and the federal government for higher education which fostered the development of a national, secular culture in the US to the detriment of local and religious cultures. Though there were numerous attempts to establish non-denominational, state universities beforehand, they were unsuccessful until after the war between the states, when the increasing financial role of the federal government and business began to diminish the local and denominational character of higher education by channeling money into institutions which would have otherwise had to turn to private funding from local patrons and religious denominations. The resulting independence of these institutions from local control has been interpreted as the rise of academic freedom, but in practice it translated into an increasing amount of federal government and business influence over educational issues previously retained by localities and religious denominations. This transfer of power was part of the centralizing process carried out by the Northern states during the war between the states. The passage of the Morrill Act, which established the land grant universities to serve economic needs, was only made possible by the secession of the Southern states and the subsequent absence of their unanimous opposition to it based on states’ rights arguments. As Brubacher and Rudy note, “opponents of the original Morrill Act had charged that it would only be an entering wedge for a vast extension of federal power. Subsequent events seemed to bear out this prediction.” Indeed, one hundred years later the land grants were just one part of a vast system of federal expenditures for higher education, which included both direct and indirect (by way of student loans and grants) subsidies to universities.

Federal funds, which financed 83% of total American research in the natural sciences by the end of WWII,\textsuperscript{55} played a large role in shifting the emphasis of higher education away from teaching and toward research. The research emphasis was already crucial to the land grants because they reduced the cultural component of the college curriculum while increasing the emphasis on the utilitarian, vocational aspects of education.\textsuperscript{56} Although the Morrill Act was popularized as a means of fostering the education of farmers and tradesmen for their professions, these colleges quickly became centers of research. Vocational training was soon supplemented by graduate education leading to advanced professional degrees. A century after the passage of the Morrill Act, the 68 land-grant institutions, of which all but two (Cornell and M.I.T.) were public, accounted for 20% of the master’s degrees and 40% of the doctorates granted in the US.\textsuperscript{57}

The transformation of the college into the university altered undergraduate teaching to replace the prescribed general curriculum with the specialized character of graduate education based on the German model. The free elective system established by Charles Eliot at Harvard, for instance, transformed most of the 4 year undergraduate curriculum into elective courses. By allowing students to tailor their education to their individual desires and capacities, this change separated Harvard from religious institutions and their value systems. Instead of inculcating a particular denominational culture in all students, Eliot sought to free students from the constraints of a prescribed curriculum in order to promote individual creation and achievement. The moral and denominational aspect was declared out of bounds for college education, and individual students were left to themselves to choose whatever religion they wished to practice and whatever courses they wished to take.\textsuperscript{58}

By ensuring that the new colleges would not provide any explicit form of cultural education, Eliot established an idea of education at Harvard in which knowledge would be considered value-free. The goal was to maintain a neutral stance regarding culture, but the result was an

\textsuperscript{55} Brubacher and Rudy, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 230-231.

\textsuperscript{56} The Morrill Act only provides support to colleges where the “leading object shall be . . . to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts.” Morrill Act, 1862, as reprinted in \textit{American Higher Education: A Documentary History}, ed. by Richard Hofstadter and Wilson Smith, Vol. II (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 568.

\textsuperscript{57} Rainsford, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 96-97.

institutionalization of a particular concept of knowledge which emphasized secularization, specialization and research to the detriment of general education within a denominational context. This departure marked a fundamental change in the American understanding, not just of the purpose of higher education but also of the very structure of knowledge.

The idea of the humanities developed as a consequence of the apparent lack of cultural education at secularized colleges such as Eliot’s Harvard. College teachers and administrators began to feel that the cultural transmission previously provided by the denominational context should continue, but without religious overtones in a non-denominational college. In order to take control of this cultural transmission, educators assembled a secular canon based on the idea of an education in the “humanities.” The content of the humanities made explicit the notion of culture already implicit in the way the modern university structured knowledge as fragmented into separate disciplines, each of which was putatively making steady progress toward an objective, universal, and secular truth. Almost as soon as the older religious attempts at integrating knowledge into a metaphysical framework was displaced by value-neutrality, a new humanist basis for integrating a college education into a unified, secular perspective replaced the denominational frameworks.

This national culture was defended with the idea that an education in the classics of the Western tradition functions to create the basis for democracy and responsible citizenship, if not for civilization itself. As Carnochan shows, the Western civilization curriculum has its roots in the late 19th century “Civics” movement, which attempted to promulgate a patriotic, nationalist ideology through high school “Civics” textbooks. By the beginning of the 20th century, there was a similar movement at secularized colleges and universities to establish a general curriculum no longer based on the teaching of a religious denomination but rather on a new “canon” of secular culture. But though the “Civics” movement provided the rationale and content for the first Western Civilization curricula, often conceived, as at Stanford and Dartmouth, as “Problems of Citizenship” courses, this curriculum could not have gained ground if the land grants and the free elective system had not paved the way by eliminating the religious denominations which previously defined culture at colleges. Moreover, both the humanities disciplines and the Western civilization curriculum languished in the period between the wars, when the creation

60. Carnochan, op. cit., pp. 72-79.
of the idea of national unity was no longer a political imperative, only to return with the onset of the Cold War and the perceived need for a national consensus. “In both its remote and immediate origins, Western civ’ was a war baby. The first such course was instituted at Columbia immediately after WWI, as a continuation of the war issues’ course offered during hostilities. It defined the traditions of the West as those for which the Allies had fought against the Hun. The course had few imitators between the wars, but after WWII it became the most widely taught history course on American campuses.”\textsuperscript{61} As Peter Novick shows, the length and nature of the Cold War was the true guarantor of the success of the humanities in establishing themselves as disciplines at the university whose claims to objectivity were ultimately based on an enforced ideological conformity to national interests in the Cold War.\textsuperscript{62}

Because history and literature have only been able to establish themselves as disciplines to the extent that their work was seen as useful for creating a national culture, the 20th century rise of the humanities in the US has necessarily coincided with the spread of the idea of universal knowledge and the increasing influence of the federal government as the guarantor of the consensus needed to legitimate the idea of universality.

**Weber and the Critique of Universal Knowledge**

Although the idea of universal knowledge exemplified in Newman’s work was indispensable for justifying the replacement in late 19th century America of denominational conformity with the principle of disciplinary autonomy, this theory of knowledge begins to be challenged, at least in Germany, by the turn of the 20th century. Part of the reason for this is the rapidity with which such a theory of knowledge, once institutionalized, revealed its statist character, thus triggering anti-statist critiques. Since Germany was the site of the first research universities, this conflict had already developed there by the 1870s, when Nietzsche delivered his scathing critique of the university.\textsuperscript{63} It was not until the early 20th century, however, that this critique gained enough currency to begin to dislodge the


idea of universal knowledge even among academics such as Max Weber.

Like Newman, Weber insists on separating facts from values to refute claims by scientists that their research could lead to any conclusions about values. For this reason, he is adamantly opposed to the idea of professors “pleading” for particular political or moral attitudes in the lecture room. Science cannot make any statements which give an evaluation of a particular end or set of values (as embodied for instance in a religion or a political party). For Weber, it can only evaluate the efficacy of a particular means for arriving at a predetermined end and predict some consequences of the pursuit of a specific end.64 As with Newman, the separation of facts from values serves to limit the scientist’s right to espouse certain values or goals as if they had “scientific” justification. Any particular value position taken by a professor could not be based on objective scientific facts, but only on personal and scientifically undemonstrable opinions.65

However, contrary to Newman, Weber also notes that knowledge cannot exist without a prior set of values which determines the questions and problems to be investigated: “in social sciences the stimulus to the posing of scientific problems is in actuality always given by practical ‘questions.’ Hence the very recognition of the existence of a scientific problem coincides, personally, with the possession of specifically oriented motives and values.”66 According to Weber, the total separation of factual knowledge from values, which Newman defends as a possibility in the secular tradition, never actually exists. By assuming it is possible to pursue knowledge for its own sake, this separation only obscures the role of values in creating knowledge. For knowledge could not even come into existence were it not for the practical and moral concerns which guide all human effort. Which interests to pursue in research and which questions to ask in teaching will always be determined by such “extraneous” considerations, because without them there would be no knowledge. The most basic facts can only come into being within a practical context. As Weber outlines: “Only a small portion of existing concrete reality is colored by our value-conditioned interest and it alone is significant to us. It is significant because it reveals relationships which are important to us due to their connection with our values. Only because and to the extent that this is the case is it worth-

65. Ibid., pp. 1-5.
while for us to know it in its individual features. We cannot discover, however, what is meaningful to us by means of a ‘presuppositionless’ investigation of empirical data. Rather perception of its meaningfulness to us is the presupposition of its becoming an object of investigation.”

The structure of knowledge described by Weber leads to the conclusion that the separation of disciplines is not determined by the nature of the universe, as Newman claims, but rather by a differentiation of problems facing communities. “It is not the ‘actual’ interconnections of ‘things’ but the conceptual interconnections of problems which define the scope of the various sciences. A new ‘science’ emerges where new problems are pursued by new methods and truths are thereby discovered which open up significant new points of view.”

A complete picture of the universe could not be created by adding together all the separate disciplines because each discipline is not organized as a section of a total whole but as a tool for solving particular problems. The facts discovered in the pursuit of knowledge are strictly determined by the particular tools employed. Events which cannot be dealt with by using these tools are simply dismissed. No matter how many different disciplines were to be added to the “store” of knowledge, a human perspective could never even approach a complete view of the universe because knowledge is not organized as a mirror of reality but as a collection of particular solutions to a limited set of problems. Given this understanding of knowledge, to ask of the university that it provide a complete picture of the universe makes no more sense than to ask such a thing of a carpenter’s toolbox.

The unity of a discipline is not based on its ability to provide an objective truth, but on a pre-established consensus about the goals of research. This consensus cannot be constructed from within the discipline but must necessarily come from outside. In technical disciplines, the outside interest will be determined largely by economic interests, either directly or mediated by the state. In issues of culture, because a discipline is organized to transcend local discourse by creating a national one, the

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67. *Ibid.*, pp. 76-7. Later on in this essay, he writes: “For none of those systems of ideas, which are absolutely indispensable in the understanding of those segments of reality which are meaningful at a particular moment, can exhaust its infinite richness. They are all attempts, on the basis of the present state of our knowledge and the available conceptual patterns, to bring order into the chaos of those facts which we have drawn into the field circumscribed by our interest.” *Ibid.*, p. 105.


goals of a discipline will be set by the cultural needs of the nation. In all of these cases, the unity and claim to objectivity of a particular discipline will depend on the value consensus which determines the goals of research. Once this consensus breaks down, the discipline itself will be unable to maintain its autonomy and cohesion.

In spite of his insights into the relation between knowledge and values, Weber’s support of the state monopoly on education in Germany led him to retain a notion of value-free science whose effect was to buttress national culture. By the time he was writing, the outside ideological consensus on culture which could guarantee the unity of the social sciences had already broken down at German universities. In the face of an impending fragmentation of the disciplines, he defends value-free science in order to silence alternative value systems and thereby re-establish a putative, if not a genuine, consensus. Describing the situation in 1917, he writes: “Forty years ago there existed among the scholars working in our discipline, the widespread belief that of the various possible points of view in the domain of practical-political preferences, ultimately only one was the correct one. (Schmoller himself to be sure took this position only to a limited extent.) Today this is no longer the case among the proponents of the assertion of professorial evaluations — as may easily be demonstrated. The legitimacy of the assertion of professorial evaluations is no longer defended in the name of an ethical imperative whose comparatively simple postulate of justice, both in its ultimate foundations as well as in its consequences, partly was, and partly seemed to be, relatively unambiguous and above all relatively impersonal (due to its specifically suprapersonal character). Rather, as the result of an inevitable development, it is now done in the name of a patchwork of cultural values, i.e., actually subjective demands on culture, or quite openly, in the name of the alleged ‘rights of the teacher’s personality.’ One may well wax indignant over this, but one cannot — because it is a value-judgment — refute this point of view. Of all types of prophecy, this ‘personally’ tinted professorial type of prophecy is the only one which is altogether repugnant. An unprecedented situation exists when a large number of officially accredited prophets do not do their preaching on the streets, or in churches or other public places or in sectarian conventicles, but rather feel themselves competent to enunciate their evaluations on ultimate questions ‘in the name of science’ in governmentally privileged lecture halls in which they are neither controlled, checked by discussion, nor subject to contradiction.”

of values of an earlier era justified value-judgments as a means of maintaining an ethical order, the proliferation of value perspectives leads, according to Weber, to a situation in which the espousal of values is no longer legitimate. Because values cannot be determined rationally, the defense of a particular set of values over others will always be arbitrary. Weber then concludes that, within a context of competing systems of values, professors must remain silent about their value-judgments because any pronouncements for or against particular values would be scientifically unjustified and could only be made based on personal preferences.

Weber objects to the espousal of values only in a situation of competing value-systems and realizes that a pre-existing consensus would make such a prohibition on value-judgments superfluous — a common set of values would in any case suffuse the entire discourse at the university and there would be no point in objecting. But in making this distinction between two historical situations, Weber assumes that the proliferation of value systems was “an inevitable development” of the advance of knowledge whereas it was itself a consequence of the attempt to create secular knowledge — i.e. a knowledge divorced from values. Since knowledge is always based on a presupposed value system, secularization cannot emancipate knowledge from prejudices. Instead, the elimination of a single totalizing system of values from the constitution of knowledge creates the plurality of competing value systems Weber describes. By assuming the inevitability of this new situation, Weber in effect affirms it.

Weber does this because such a situation allows him to suggest individual preference as the sole criterium for choosing one value system over another: “The fruit of the tree of knowledge, which is distasteful to the complacent but which is, nonetheless, inescapable, consists in the insight that every single important activity and ultimately life as a whole, if it is not to be permitted to run on as an event in nature but is instead to be consciously guided, is a series of ultimate decisions through which the soul — as in Plato — chooses its own fate, i.e., the meaning of its activity and existence.” By depicting the question of values as inevitably an issue of conflict between various perspectives, Weber is led to the conclusion that values may in the end be determined by individual choices rather than by adherence to a received tradition. This conclusion leads him to esteem individual choice above all other values. Academic freedom,

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71. The plurality he discusses was actually the result of the increasing presence of socialists and anarchists who opposed the policies of the national state.

which previously did not even exist as a concept, 73 now becomes the highest value in a secular situation of supposed value-neutrality.

Weber defends academic freedom with the argument that researchers are incompetent to make any value decisions based on science: “The favourite argument that the state — which means, it should be noted, the political group dominant at the moment — cannot agree to allow the universities to propagate doctrines which are inimical to the state contains a fundamental error which, it cannot be denied, is also made in academic circles about the meaning and nature of university teaching in general. . . . Universities do not have it as their task to teach any outlook or standpoint which is either ‘hostile to the state’ or ‘friendly to the state.’ They are not institutions for the inculcation of absolute or ultimate moral values. They analyse facts, their conditions, laws and interrelations; they analyse concepts, their logical presuppositions and content. They do not and they cannot teach what should happen — since this is a matter of ultimate personal values and beliefs, of a fundamental outlook, which cannot be demonstrated like a scientific proposition.” 74 In order to justify the necessity of academic freedom, Weber points out that values cannot be demonstrated scientifically and that science therefore should not be involved in inculcating moral values. As Robert Proctor explains concerning this line of argument: “Value-neutrality represents a critique of scientism — a desire to preserve a realm of values untouched by the authority of technical expertise. Science must be value-free to guarantee that values will remain science-free.” 75 Weber’s separation of facts from values opposes the notion, shared by both scientism and Newman’s defense of theology, that moral imperatives are to be found in reality itself, as part of the fabric of the universe. If values are not to be found in nature but must be imposed by human will, as Weber argues, then science is unable to determine values and a scientist has no special authority to make moral judgments about religion or politics. Weber’s distinction between facts, which are determined by nature, and values, which are products of the human will, serves to limit both the authority of science to make pronouncements concerning values and the authority of

religion to arrive at factual knowledge based on moral imperatives.

This distinction between facts and values, however, only provides a qualified defense of academic freedom. Given a presupposed set of values, science can arrive at conclusions about nature which are objective, even though they are not neutral, keeping in mind, as Proctor points out, that “neutrality and objectivity are not the same thing. Neutrality refers to whether science takes a stand; objectivity, to whether a science merits certain claims to reliability. The two need not have anything to do with each other. Certain sciences may be completely ‘objective’ — that is valid — and yet designed to serve certain political interests. Geologists know more about oil-bearing shales than about many other rocks, but the knowledge is thereby no less reliable.”

Given a particular value framework, the idea of academic freedom can be useful in preventing unpleasant facts from being suppressed. Taking Alvin Gouldner’s example of the doctor who sides with the patient rather than the virus, academic freedom would be akin to allowing the doctor to give a bad prognosis, even though such a prognosis is not something the patient would like to hear. The doctor’s freedom does not extend, however, to choosing ultimate values, e.g., deciding to take the side of the virus against the patient.

Similarly, academic freedom cannot be used to defend the researcher’s right to choose the goals of research. If science is not qualified to make value-judgments, then researchers also cannot make any decisions about the goals of research. This does not mean, however, that a religious denomination, or whatever institution controls the university, cannot make such decisions based on its own goals and values. On the contrary, if science cannot decide values, then these decisions must of necessity come from a non-scientific perspective. To the extent that a religious denomination does not make such decisions, they will simply be taken over by some other outside entity like the government. Weber, however, presumes that the impossibility of a scientific determination of values is an argument for maintaining value pluralism at the university. By guaranteeing that the individual may choose his or her own values, such pluralism assumes that the construction of values, because it is not rational and universal, must be completely relativistic and dependent on individual choice. Believing that he has made a rational argument in support of academic freedom in determining values based on the idea of value-neutrality, Weber feels justified in treating this type of academic “value-freedom” not as a prejudice but as a logical precondition for the pursuit of

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76. Ibid. p. 10.
knowledge. In doing so, he assumes that a plurality of value systems is necessary at the university because it allows students to make comparisons and come to an informed decision about values.

When individual choice in the determination of values becomes the highest value at the university and compulsion becomes the worst evil, all value perspectives, according to Weber, will be given equal opportunity. But this can only be important if one assumes that values are a matter which can be rationally decided. This is not the case, even according to Weber himself. Since knowledge can only be pursued within a previously imposed value system, the important question is which value system will determine the pursuit of knowledge. This decision cannot be made individually because it is never really a decision but a presupposition. An affirmation of choice itself “implicitly denies the existence of a pre-existing horizon of significance, whereby some things are worthwhile and others less so, and still others not at all, quite anterior to choice.” Value pluralism denies the fact that values are always collective constructions, grounded in both a spatial context of family and community relations and a temporal context of intergenerational ties. Weber’s defense of academic freedom concerning values assumes that it is possible to determine values decisionistically when in fact, as Taylor and Tate point out, every individual decision will always presuppose a “horizon of significance” — a tradition into which the individual has already been socialized.

The dream of academic value-freedom is based on the belief that it can establish and defend a university community from encroachment by an outside particularistic community which seeks to determine ultimate values. This dream gains legitimacy by blurring the distinction between facts and values upon which it is based. For though academic freedom to arrive at factual knowledge within the framework of a particular value orientation is legitimate as a defense of impartiality against prejudice, academic freedom to determine values is entirely another matter. Though both the university and the outside community would be served by maintaining impartiality in determining facts, there is no such thing as impartiality in determining values. Knowledge will always be dependent on an outside context for its values, and when the idea of academic freedom is invoked to allow researchers to decide values, the effect is not to maintain impartiality but to defend one set of values against another.

Since individual choice in determining values is itself a rationally

unjustifiable value, its institutionalization is at least as arbitrarily exclu-
sionary as the subordination of knowledge to a particular religious doc-
trine. Weber’s defense of academic freedom concerns not only facts but
also values and consequently depends on beliefs which precede the indi-
vidual choice he would like to establish as the final arbiter of values. He
refuses to accept this, however, and insists that value pluralism is all-
inclusive, pointing out that he defends the rights of socialists and anar-
chists to teach at state-controlled institutions. He only rejects a “Dutch”
model of dealing with academic freedom in which particular denomina-
tional or party interests are given the right to found, fund, and control their
own non-state universities in which a particular perspective would be
enforced. But this rejection of denominational education shows that the
idea of academic value-freedom encourages the banishment of particular
perspectives from the university because of their perceived intolerance.
The condition for being allowed to teach or to provide money to open a
university is the toleration of other value systems in the constitution of
knowledge. Yet such a toleration necessitates the dismantling of all total-
izing perspectives on knowledge which do not recognize individual free-
dom of choice as the highest value. This would exclude from the
university every specific religious community which operates according to
certain shared traditions that will automatically limit the individual’s right
to choose values. All value systems other than those based on individual
choice become marginalized in the constitution of knowledge.

The ultimate effect of establishing individual choice as the highest
value, however, is to ensconce the nation-state as the implicit metaphysi-
cal referent of all knowledge. This means first of all that religious denomi-
nations must be supplanted by the state as the founder and financer of
universities. By Weber’s times, this had already been accomplished in
Germany, and he sought to maintain the state monopoly on education to
insure that value-neutrality dominated all university endeavor. Yet he also
saw the danger that the state would use its power to suppress viewpoints
opposing its interests. He supported the state only insofar as he considered
it a neutral party funding the university without influencing the teachers’
value-judgments, and his defense of academic freedom was directed pri-
arily against state intervention in university affairs. But since his insis-
tence on academic freedom was based on the assumption that the state
must remain in control of funding for higher education, though he disputed

the state’s right to intervene in determining the results of research, he agreed that all university research should serve the interests of the state.  

As Weber pointed out concerning the role of values in constituting cultural knowledge, a particular value framework is always implicit within any research project. The crucial issue is who will determine this framework. For Weber, the choice is between the state as embodied in “the political group dominant at the moment,” an alternative political group, a religious community, or researchers themselves. By supporting academic freedom as the highest value, Weber attempted to counter state power by defending the right of researchers to come to their own conclusions about the values to be used in guiding their research. “Just as without the investigator’s conviction regarding the significance of particular cultural facts, every attempt to analyze concrete reality is absolutely meaningless, so the direction of his personal belief, the refraction of values in the prism of his mind, gives direction to his work. And the values to which the scientific genius relates the object of his inquiry may determine, i.e., decide the ‘conception’ of the whole epoch, not only concerning what is regarded as ‘valuable’ but also concerning what is significant or insignificant, ‘important’ or ‘unimportant’ in the phenomena.”  

Though he realized that research can never be conducted independently of a particular set of values, it is not society which is to determine these values for science. Rather, Weber delegated to the “scientific genius” the task of deciding values for “the whole epoch,” since this sovereignty over the direction of research inevitably confers sovereignty over the system of values which defines the university.  

But if it is impossible for a researcher to decide values scientifically, what determines the “direction of his belief, the refraction of values in the prism of his mind” in Weber’s vision of the university? Here Weber’s answer makes explicit the implications of Newman’s initial separation of secular from sacred knowledge. The final effect of Weber’s attempt to create an immanent ethics is simply to obscure the organizing national context within which research in a discipline gains meaning. Though a researcher might decide to pursue a particular project because of his or her passion for the subject matter, control over funding will inevitably give the state the power to determine which projects are supported and which abandoned, which disciplines will grow and which will wither. Though

79. Proctor shows that in Weber’s own research “the ultimate value-standard for economic inquiry must be Staatsraison — the interests of the state.” See Proctor, op. cit., p. 139.  
Weber’s notion of academic freedom is designed to create a university value system in which “research communities” are free to choose their own directions according to the intellectual spirit of the age, the practical consequence is that local religious communities lose power to national, public interest and, in the case of the US, to business interests in determining the structure and goals of higher education. The primary reason for this is that research communities are in fact incapable of constructing values, and the researchers by default end up falling back on values derived from elsewhere. Once religious determination of values is suppressed, higher education, both in its technical and its cultural aspects, becomes an instrument whose goals have become manipulable by the national state.

The 20th century history of the university is the story of how the various disciplines have sought to professionalize themselves by establishing their own research communities. Since the fundamental determination of the directions of research for all fields is left up to researchers, the individual disciplines rather than any outside communities set the agendas for work done at the university, eliminating all religious perspectives on knowledge. While religious doctrines can only maintain themselves on the basis of a supporting community, the ideal of individual choice undermines this community check on the pursuit of knowledge by lifting people out of the community contexts into which they were born and treating them as individual agents which can now be easily manipulated according to economic and political ends. Claiming to constitute a set of “research communities” centered in the various disciplines which make their own decisions about the values which will guide research, the idea of academic freedom functions to disempower any outside community which is not the state from determining the goals of research.

**The Ideal of Objectivity and Professionalization**

This increasing orientation of knowledge to the public sphere is a result not only of political and business control of funding but of the very structure of knowledge when organized into academic disciplines. By replacing the moral imperatives in education which had previously dominated the antebellum colleges, the late 19th century ideal of objectivity served as a means for lending professional status to the academic disciplines which would free professors from local community control. Not only the biological and social sciences but also the liberal arts sought to define themselves as separate disciplines, each seeking to establish “professional” status through the claim that each was making steady progress
toward a unitary and objective truth. The key proposition in this claim to objective truth was the separation of knowledge from values. Historians, for instance, embraced a scientific method according to which their work “must be rigidly factual and empirical, shunning hypothesis; the scientific venture was scrupulously neutral on larger questions of end and meaning; and, if systematically pursued, it might ultimately produce a comprehensive, ‘definitive’ history.”

As opposed to an older generation of “amateur” historians, who saw their work as broadly based and more closely allied with literature and moral philosophy than science, these scientific historians concentrated on expanding factual knowledge, each in a specialized sub-field, in order to attain the final truth of history.

Similar endeavors transformed the structure of higher education by dividing knowledge into separate disciplines and then sub-fields within disciplines, creating specialization and professionalization along disciplinary lines. As Novick notes, this reconceptualization of the goals of knowledge “had enormous professional advantages.” Specialization and the avoidance of moral issues decreased the chance of confrontation and controversy, thereby creating the semblance of objectivity and intellectual progress which guaranteed the expert status of university researchers. This new status provided an increasingly effective insulation for researchers and the university from outside pressures. “The professional’s livelihood was held to depend not upon satisfying any particular client, but rather was a consequence of upholding universalistic professional standards which the laity as a whole would honor.” Professionalization and the idea of objectivity “were intimately linked, each process reinforcing the other.”

This link between professionalization and objectivity does not suggest that academics were insincere, but rather that forces outside the academy conspired to reward those researchers who adhered to the model of objectivity and value-free science. Those who did not share these ideals became increasingly marginalized in the old-time colleges, while the new breed of professional researcher was being promoted into the university positions which steadily gained in prestige and authority. Likewise, though researchers were not necessarily nationalist, professionalization had the long-term effect of transforming higher education from a local to a national enterprise. This occurred, first, as a consequence of disciplinary autonomy, which, as Thomas Bender describes, was “able to achieve

82. Ibid., p. 56.
hegemony by discrediting an alternative pattern of science based upon different assumptions about the nature of reality and rooted in civic, as opposed to disciplinary, institutions.”84 Once knowledge was organized along national, disciplinary rather than local, denominational lines: “disciplinary peers, not a diverse urban public, became the only legitimate evaluators of intellectual work. If the civic institution pattern of intellectual life had woven together the various threads of intellectual life, the fabric of urban public culture was riven by the end of the nineteenth century. Knowledge and competence increasingly developed out of the internal dynamics of esoteric disciplines rather than within the context of shared perceptions of public needs.”85

Bender is typical in describing the transformation as a transferring of the foundations of knowledge from a civic community to a “research community.” But research communities are in fact not independent social groups; they are only unified by the particular goals to which the various disciplines are subordinated. The idea of the research community as the foundation of objective truth is the most recent attempt to justify the separation and autonomy of the various disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities.86 Using this idea to establish a basis for consensus, researchers, though no longer able to maintain the absolute and objective truth of their results, can still maintain a provisional validity based on the intersubjective confirmation of a research community.

The necessary agreement about basic values for the constitution of a research community must come from the outside, as something determined beforehand. “No community can be satisfied that its discourse is objective

86. On the contemporary dominance of the idea of the “research community” as the foundation of objective truth, see Novick, *op. cit.*, p. 570.
— or even know what it would mean to be objective — without substantial agreement on values, goals, and perceptions of reality. All of the factors so far considered could not, in combination, have established objectivity as the accepted norm within the American historical community at the end of the nineteenth century were it not for one additional factor: the extraordinary degree of ideological homogeneity within that community.\textsuperscript{87} This homogeneity in turn was not based on values internal to the discipline but external economic and political imperatives. The professionalization of the disciplines in the US has only succeeded to the extent that the researchers’ goals have coincided with those of businesses and the federal government.

In the natural sciences, industrial applications have been the motor behind university expansion, industrial interests transforming the landscape of higher education in the 19th century through the unprecedented gifts to found universities such as Stanford, Cornell, Johns Hopkins, and the University of Chicago.\textsuperscript{88} As Novick has shown in relation to history as a discipline, in the humanities the emphasis on scientific objectivity and an accompanying professionalization of the discipline has only occurred when the federal government saw history as useful for its goals: developing a sense of American identity in new immigrants at the end of the 19th century, creating anti-German propaganda during WWI,\textsuperscript{89} and supporting Cold War ideology after WWII. In those periods when the discipline of history had no such usefulness for the state — prior to the war between the states and from the 1920s to the 1940s — history as a professional discipline either did not exist (the American Historical Association, for instance, was not founded until 1884) or languished.\textsuperscript{90}

\textit{The Contemporary Fragmentation of Disciplinary Unity}

Left to its own, a university characterized by value pluralism will fragment into a chaotic group of competing perspectives with little to say to each other. As can be seen from both Weber’s remarks and the history

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{87} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 61.
  \item \textsuperscript{88} Hofstadter and Metzger, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 413-416.
  \item \textsuperscript{89} With regard to this WWI propaganda effort, Novick notes: “This experience is rich in lessons about what a weak reed “professionalism” is in checking excesses. In fulfilling their propaganda tasks, wartime historians were almost always scrupulous about maintaining formal norms of scholarship. . . . . But viewing the venture in the large, the participants could not escape the realization that one could quite easily be flagrantly propagandistic without violating norms of scholarship narrowly conceived. A project which failed to make the requisite point could be abandoned or modified.” Novick, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 126.
  \item \textsuperscript{90} On the “stalling” of professionalization in the inter-war period, see Novick, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 168-205.
\end{itemize}
of the university, such chaos has been kept under control by outside government pressure, which has nurtured ideological conformity with a nationalist agenda. But as pressure for the maintenance of this stance erodes externally, the internal cohesion of the university and of the individual disciplines themselves begins to disintegrate. As Russell Berman notes with regard to the most recent turn in this development: “If the natural sciences have been nourished by the Pentagon and the defense establishment, if the social sciences have been part of a welfare-state agenda, and the humanities a cultural armament on both fronts — Western culture as the culture of NATO abroad and democracy at home — then the internal identity of the university’s disciplines is about to become as obsolete as the Berlin Wall.”

The end of the Cold War has already resulted in a substantial reduction in government funding for the research tasks of the university have been the foundation for disciplinary autonomy and specialization. This autonomy and the consequent semblance of objectivity depend on the ability of a discipline to maintain a consensus about basic values which is in line with the outside interests guaranteeing funding and prestige. Once this consensus breaks down outside the university, it will inevitably break down within the disciplines, destroying the unity upon which they depend for their survival.

While the state still maintains cultural hegemony in countries such as Germany and France, there are signs that a national consensus is breaking down in the US, especially within the humanities, where the multiculturalist Left has been arguing for more than two decades that the liberal arts curriculum of the Cold War period institutionalized a particular nationalist culture in place of a diversity of specific ones. Contrary to all expectations, the Left’s long march through the institutions of higher education may yet succeed in subverting them and bringing about their downfall, notwithstanding the fact that this downfall also means the self-destruction of the academic Left. The growing influence of multiculturalism and the religious Right has already eroded the old Cold War consensus based on “Western civilization” and “great books,” which had unified the goals of researchers in the humanities. Moreover, the rise of cultural studies and various critiques of scientific rationality in almost all humanities and social science departments is beginning to blur the methodological differences that separated the disciplines from each other. “If a jaundiced view of the ersatz foundationalism provided by invoking the Western liberal ‘conversation that is us’ came from the left, as analagous [sic] skepticism

91. Russell Berman, “Perestroika for the University!,” in Telos 81 (Fall 1989), p. 121.
came from dissidents in the Soviet bloc, there was nothing ideological about the perception that ‘communities of the competent’ were not, in fact, steadily marching toward convergent truth. Hard as one might try, it was impossible to locate that emerging Peircean scholarly consensus which was to sustain objectivity in place of old-style foundationalism. In virtually every disciplinary realm, very much including the historical, one found either factional polarization, or fragmented chaos which made factionalism seem, by comparison, like a kind of order.”  

“As a broad community of scholars united by common aims, common standards, and common purposes, the discipline of history had ceased to exist.”

Each faction in the current culture wars debate — Cold War cultural conservatives and multiculturalists — is attempting to create a national consensus based either on Arnold’s vision of the progress of Western civilization or on a multiculturalist, interest-group ethic in the case of the latter. But while the end of the war between the states has rendered the first vision unnecessary, the multiculturalist ethic also has limited chances for survival as a national ideology because it is already based on pluralism. Yet the disintegration of a national culture may not result in the cultural barbarism that conservatives in the tradition of Matthew Arnold fear. The end of a secular, national culture may provide the opportunity for the re-emergence of a civic culture based in local and denominational interests. Given the impossibility of combining the various perspectives now current at the university into a single unified culture, the system of denominational colleges in the US prior to the war between the states provides perhaps the best available model for the future. Proponents of denominational education have already drawn this conclusion, George Marsden, for example, calling on “serious Christians to concentrate on building distinctly Christian institutions that will provide alternatives to secular colleges and universities.”

93. Ibid., p. 628.
If the denominational college re-emerges in importance, teaching and research may also begin to separate. In the antebellum college, research had no role. “For over a century and a half American collegiate education relied chiefly on young tutors, having in all its faculties only a handful of professors of some maturity and length of tenure.”95 According to the MLA, this situation is rapidly returning but in a way which has created a widening gap between the part-timers, who do much of the teaching but receive little remuneration or job security, and the tenured professors, who are paid to do research. “In 1970, 22% of the faculty nationwide consisted of part-timers, but by 1993 the face of higher education had changed so drastically that part-timers constituted 40% of the faculty.”96 The rapid increase is a consequence of a situation in which “the dual imperatives of access and research potentially propel a distinction between, on the one hand, knowledge work based on intellectual capacities uniquely vested in individuals and, on the other, undergraduate teaching perceived as routine service work seeking to transmit and develop ‘basic skills’.”97 But this unfortunate division of faculty into tenured professors and part-timers would cease to exist if research in the humanities were to be completely taken out of the college and the Ph.D. were no longer required for teaching. This is already the case at most two-year institutions and may be the most viable model for four-year colleges as well. Such a change would not only eliminate the current two-tiered structure of the faculty, but would return the college to a mission of teaching skills and transmitting culture. At the same time, the creation of culture could once again become a community activity rather than a professional one, the Ph.D. going the way of the Communist Party membership card.

95. Hofstadter and Metzger, op. cit., p. 124.