DOI:10.1111/j.1741-2005.2008.00256.x

St. Augustine, Liberalism, and the Defence of Liberal Education

Ryan N S Topping

Abstract

Failure to attend to the claims of theology as a public form of discourse has made us blind to the true causes of our attachment to the university. In what follows I want to explore why it is that liberal societies continue to value the university but increasingly find it difficult to articulate coherent reasons for its defence. I shall argue that any plausible defence of the value of the university within Western societies requires the concomitant recognition of two propositions: first, of the moral value of the search into the meaning of human freedom and, secondly, of the certainty that human freedom can only properly be exercised in obedience to the objective order of truth. I shall further argue that, for all its strengths, Liberalism as a political doctrine cannot conceptually unite these two propositions because of its commitment to a voluntaristic interpretation of freedom. As a modest proposal for constructive progress in this debate, in my concluding remarks I suggest three ways that St. Augustine's early educational thought makes more intelligible our own educational ideals than do major competing accounts.

Keywords

Liberal Education, St Augustine, Liberalism, multiversity, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*

Introduction: From the university to the multiversity

Who can tell us what the university is for? Patterned after the medieval guilds, its foremost and original purpose, as Newman beautifully described it, "aims at raising the intellectual tone of society," at cultivating gentlemen. The university's essential spirit, he argued, strives to cultivate liberal knowledge in students and teachers alike.[1]

[1] John Henry Newman, *The Idea of the University* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1923), Discourses VII, 10 and V,9, and Preface.

© The author 2008. Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK, and 350 Main Street, Malden MA 02148, USA

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2008.00256.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Of course, long since has Newman's ceased to be the leading conception of what makes a university.[2] That moral and intellectual confidence with which the institution was founded nearly a thousand years ago has dissolved. Already by 1852, when Newman penned these words, the German research university was becoming the new model. As political and industrial revolutions advanced, science and research displaced teaching and the arts at the centre of the university. Writing in 1930 Abraham Flexner gave expression to the 'Idea of the Modern University' which had eclipsed the ancient one.[3] But that too has passed. Today we do better to speak of the *multiversity* if we are to consider the theoretical basis of the university at all.[4] The multiversity is inconsistent. She has no single goddess as her patron; rather, she is ruled by a pantheon of conflicting powers and interests. Based more on a set of practices and associations than on a coherent theoretical model, it draws upon competing visions of its purpose.[5] And since the end of the Second World War it has been the American university, more than any other, which has defined the nature of the institution.

[2] One may be tempted to say that Newman's idea *never* was the leading one. If we take John of Salisbury's description of Bernard of Chartres' teaching aims and methods as illustrative (cf. *Metalogicon* 1.24), then we should, perhaps, look to Chartres and 12th century Cathedral Schools more than to the universities if we are wishing to discover a period in medieval history when institutions of higher education consistently sought to unite both the moral and intellectual aims of education that Newman celebrates; cf. R.W. Southern *Medieval Humanism and other studies* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970), pp. 61–85 and Richard C. Dales *Intellectual Life of Western Europe in the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill: 1992), pp. 155–168. The sixty or so universities of the Medieval West varied widely in the composition of their curricula, their social functions, and their intellectual orientations. One need only contrast the curricular aims of 13th century Paris with the curriculum of the University of Bologna, the one, more speculatively oriented, focusing on theology, the other turned to the affairs of commerce and politics through law; cf. Jacques Verger, 'Patterns', in Walter Rüegg, ed. *Universities in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), pp. 47–52.

[3] Abraham Flexner, *Universities: American English German* (Oxford: OUP, 1930). Flexner's is an early sociological study treating the university as an institution shaped by and capable of acting upon society.

[4] Canadian political philosopher George Grant argued, for instance, that the late modern 'multiversity' is the institutional outcome of the theoretical relationship established between faith and modern science during the early modern period: "Reason as project, (that is, reason as thrown forth) is the summonsing of something before us and the putting of questions to it, so that it is forced to give its reasons for being the way it is as an object. Our paradigm is that we have knowledge when we represent anything to ourselves as object, and question it, so that it will give us its reasons .... The limitations of the human mind in synthesising facts necessitates the growing division of research into differing departments and further subdivisions. This paradigm of knowledge makes it therefore appropriate to speak of the multiversity." See his essay 'Faith and the Multiversity' in *Technology and Justice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), pp. 36–37.

[5] Clark Kerr coined the neologism 'multiversity' in his *The Uses of the University*, a series of essays written between 1963–2001 (based on his *Godkin Lectures* delivered at Harvard University) 5th edition, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 14.

© The author 2008
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2008.00256.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

In recent years a host of books have drawn our attention to the soullessness of the secular university. Included among these are Tom Wolfe's *I am Charlotte Simmons* (2004), Gavin D'Costa's *Theology and the Public Square: Church, Academy and Nation* (2005), and C. John Sommerville's *Decline of the Secular University* (2006), which claims that the liberal university's refusal to engage in religious arguments has resulted in its increasing marginalization within American society.

I grant that these and similar indictments against European and North American secular universities are, to a large extent, true. And yet, however inconsistent our own representations of the value of the university, and however drastic is its current failure to live up to our expectations, few institutions continue to inspire such public allegiance as does the university. Nearly all our professionals receive their training there: government, business, and the judiciary all look to the university when they require expert opinion; there is an established link between a nations' university-research activity and its economic strength – and, obvious since the middle of the 20th century, its effectiveness at waging war. Now, while all of these and more can be offered as explanations for why liberal societies continue to defend this medieval institution, none of this type is sufficient. The reasons for our attachment lay elsewhere, buried within a theological conception of human aspiration that continues to sustain the modern university, however much it may be despised or simply ignored.

Failure to attend to the claims of theology as a public form of discourse has made us blind to the true causes of our attachment to the university. In what follows I want to explore why it is that liberal societies continue to *value* the university but increasingly find it difficult to articulate coherent reasons for its defence. I shall argue that any plausible defence of the value of the university within Western societies requires the concomitant recognition of two propositions: first, of the moral value of the search into the meaning of human freedom and, secondly, of the certainty that human freedom can only properly be exercised in obedience to the objective order of truth. I shall further argue that, for all its strengths, Liberalism as a political doctrine cannot conceptually unite these two propositions because of its commitment to a voluntaristic interpretation of freedom. As a modest proposal for constructive progress in this debate, in my concluding remarks I suggest three ways that St. Augustine's early educational thought makes more intelligible our own educational ideals than do major competing accounts.

Liberal Education and Liberalism

Liberal societies honour the university but fail to grasp the true nature of a *liberal education* that has traditionally been the purpose of every

© The author 2008
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2008.00256.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

university. Were all the prestige presently derived from economic and military advantages be transferred, say, to technical and vocational colleges, these still would not add up to what we mean, or should mean, by a university. That is because an educational institution worthy of our highest affection has as its central goal the task of making available a liberal education. If this is, as I want to claim it is, what makes the university worthy of our society's highest public honour, it is important to understand what we mean to add to the idea of higher education by the adjective 'liberal'.

Certainly this has something to do with the complex concept of 'freedom'. As Josef Pieper articulated 50 years ago in his *Leisure: the Basis of Culture*, freedom is an ideal which leading educators throughout the Western tradition came to think could be cultivated by a certain type of education undertaken with a certain kind of end in view. Crucial for us to grasp, more now even than in Pieper's time, is that the political good pursued within Liberalism correlates to our understanding of liberal education in two distinct but related ways. In one way it informs what we take the characteristics of a free human being to be, in another, how such a person approaches his education.[6]

First, take up his characteristics. In our etymology as in our history, the liberal arts have been those disciplines suited to the *liberalis*, the free man. In the ancient world this contrasted with the aspirations occupying the slave. The *liberalis* has interests outside of the practical world, outside of the world of work. It is in this sense that we still retain the notion that a liberal education ought, somehow, to make students high-minded: as professionals, doctors, lawyers, civil servants, and military officers are all held to a code higher than what is required of the general population. And it is no coincidence that the university is responsible for producing most of them. The liberally educated person properly exercises his or her freedom for ends which reach beyond mere self-interest; his concerns include more than economic survival. This is one of the reasons why we continue to look to the university as one of the chief, indeed, one of the last, publicly recognized conduits of liberal virtues upon which liberal democracy depends. (I do not imply that the university is the *only* institution which aims so high: only that it recognizably does so.)

At its best a liberal education which the university provides is supposed to carry forward the sentiments and moral habits that underlie the just order of society. It is an education suited especially

[6] See Joseph Pieper's *Leisure, the basis of Culture* [1948], trans. by Gerald Malsbary, introduction by Roger Scruton (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1998), especially pp. 44–79, and Christopher Derrick's *Escape from Scepticism: Liberal Education as if Truth Mattered* [1977] (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001).

© The author 2008
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2008.00256.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

for citizens within a free society. We demand, for example, that every student leave the university knowing how to read and write well; they should be able to speak and argue in public. We expect that university students imbibe a sense of fair minded-ness and tolerance, and, in political questions, the ability to approach complex problems with more than the resources of simple prejudice. At university we hope students will make good friends, cultivate good taste, and, at the least, become interesting to talk to. But to anticipate an objection: that the legal possession of one man over another is no longer a political reality is only incidentally problematic to our understanding the older distinction. This is because there remain activities and states of mind which we continue to recognize as *servile*. There remains slavish thinking and slavish acting. Being small-minded, intolerant, and given to prejudice, we believe, impede a person's freedom to become good: any of these vices quite obviously disqualifies a person from attaining to a freedom worth owning. Thus, while the political conditions for the old distinction have disappeared the spiritual and psychological ones have not.

There is a second sense by which we call the liberal arts 'free'. This has more to do with our *use* of the disciplines than with the kind of person they are intended to produce. The liberal arts are said to be 'free' because they are studied for their own sake. Again, we may draw a contrast. Some disciplines are undertaken with a practical end clearly in sight, such as law, medicine, or engineering. The liberal arts are not like that. The most common division of the liberal arts, the one transmitted to the medieval world by St. Augustine, among others, and adopted by the time of the 13th century, had two parts: the *trivium* (consisting of grammar, logic, and rhetoric), and the *quadrivium* (consisting of arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy).[7] Now when the tradition said, as Newman did in the 19th century, that the liberal arts ought to be studied for their own sake, it did not mean that they should be studied 'simply and for no sake at all'.[8] Rather, the liberal arts are free because they are oriented towards the most basic of human ends, and not in the first instance towards the means suited to any one specific end. In this way liberal

[7] This does not mean the arts were equally studied at every university. 13th century Oxford, for instance, placed more emphasis on the *quadrivium*, excelling in mathematics and optics, than did the University of Paris; cf. Gordon Leff's *Paris and Oxford Universities in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries: An Institutional and Intellectual History* (Huntington, New York: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1975), pp. 139–142.

[8] As Newman explains: "In some [a liberal arts education] will have developed habits of business, power of influencing others, and sagacity. In others it will elicit the talent of philosophical speculation, and lead the mind forward to eminence in this or that intellectual department. In all [liberal education] will be a faculty of entering with comparative ease into any subject of thought, and of taking up with aptitude any science or profession." *Idea of a University*, Preface, xviii.

© The author 2008
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2008.00256.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

arts are preparatory: important for man *qua* man, important insofar as every human being has an interest in his own happiness and in cultivating his own freedom. As Hugo of St. Victor (d.1141) taught, the arts are "the best instruments, the best rudiments by which the way is prepared for the mind's complete knowledge of philosophical truth."[9] Hence, while in the sequence of study the liberal arts are prior to philosophy, in the order of priority they anticipate and are oriented towards philosophy. They are disciplines that train the mind in skills that make you capable to *philosophise*, to think philosophically about the true nature of your own freedom.

Liberal education, then, has always included the kind of disciplines that are of interest to a free person, whose education includes also the search for knowledge about freedom. Both aspects go together. Both distinguish this from merely technical and even scientific training. As it is commonly understood today, scientific education, cut off from its roots in philosophy and therefore the study of teleology, begins already with a conception of value, and must proceed from there. Liberal education, by contrast, begins partially with a conception of value (i.e. an idea of what human freedom is meant for) and partially seeks to find this out. Though scientific study can tell us a great deal about the world, it does not tell us what part of the world is valuable to study. Another kind of inquiry is needed for that. And in our tradition we still know that a liberal education – in the sense I have been describing – is very important, even that the health of a liberal society depends it. We need an education that prepares us to think about human ends. This much, I suggest, continues to invoke wide agreement. But what those ends are, or in other words, what the nature of that freedom which a liberal education ought to promote is, no longer does.

Why Liberalism cannot coherently defend Liberal Education

My thesis thus far has been that only with increasing difficulty does liberal society provide an explanation for why we should defend the university even though, oddly, it is widely recognized as a conduit of the skills and disciplines valued by our own political doctrine; further, that a liberal education requires the concurrent acceptance of two conditions stated above. Before I suggest how St. Augustine can make better sense of our educational aspirations we need to show, next, what features pertain within Liberalism which makes these two notions difficult to join.

[9] *The Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor: a medieval guide to the arts*, trans. with introduction and notes by Jerome Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 3.3.

© The author 2008
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2008.00256.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Liberalism is an answer to the question of the human political good that developed in self-conscious reaction against the tradition of Latin Christendom. It is true that 'Liberalism,' as such, admits of no univocal description. The Liberalism of Locke is not that of Kant, and neither is the same as Rawls'. There exists a plurality of visions of the good life within our political tradition. Indeed that Liberalism can accommodate a wide array of opinions is seen by its defenders as one of its exemplary virtues. And yet, the range of liberal beliefs is not infinitely diffuse. Its features emerged concretely out of the 18th century and there exist a sufficient number of familial resemblances that make identification possible: government by consent, the primacy of the individual, and faith in a doctrine of progress count as a few of the most obvious among these.[10] Now it is significant that the practice of the liberal arts, as a widely realised educational ideal, predates the birth of Liberalism as a political ideal by about six centuries. Where we might have been tempted to believe our love for the university sprang from its expressing an ideal embedded within our own political tradition, the way a parent loves what she recognizes in her child, it is we, in fact, which are the offspring. Liberalism did not produce the ideal of liberal education but inherited it. We are the beneficiaries: its origins lie elsewhere.

But this fact alone does not account for the ambiguous position of the university within our society. And it does not, of itself, explain why we cannot bring ourselves to hold in union the twin conditions that, as I argued above, make liberal education possible (i.e. both holding a substantive conception of the goal of freedom, and having as our aim the search for its meaning). Although there are several accounts of Liberalism, for our purposes two grand narratives of its birth and destiny suggest themselves. Each narrative evaluates and describes Liberalism's origin and end in opposing ways. The first, which I think more compelling, accounts for the origin of Liberalism as a Christian heresy.[11] The second, now dominant view, asks us to believe that society sprang out of the well of individual self-interest. Conjuring society out of individuality, and thereby laying hold of a self-sufficiency which monotheism allowed only to God, this narrative imagines the gift of human community flowing not from the divine act of creation, but from the creative exercise of human will. By this account liberal justice founds its legitimacy upon an original contract, from out of

[10] Cf. Robert Song's *Christianity and Liberal Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 40–48.

[11] For a defence of this view see Oliver O'Donovan *Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), especially pp. 243–252 and Aidan Nichols O.P. *Christendom Awake: On Re-Energising the Church in Culture* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), pp. 71–89.

© The author 2008
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2008.00256.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

which (no less miraculously) flows a continuing source of political identity.

Insofar as we have accepted this second story as our own, we will not be able to account for our love for the university. A people that believe its justice is founded singly upon consent cannot comprehend what it has not, of itself, willed. In this kind of society technological achievements are supposed to excite for the same reason as does the ballot: they are both expressive acts of will, that is, of our freedom. And of a freedom apparently indeterminate: a freedom formed by nothing outside of itself, least of all by a god. Thus, insofar as liberal society remains sceptical about its ability to know an objective end for our freedom, the meaning of the liberal arts too will remain unknown. At the centre of our highest educational ideal lays both a question and an answer: dogma and an open search. How these two are compatible is a riddle we have forgotten how to solve.

When did we forget? That date is not easy to specify, precisely, though its general location can be mapped onto any number of credible histories of the rise and fall of Western philosophy. Relevant here is the failed conviction within late medieval scholasticism that the human mind shares a *connaturality* with the good. In all parts of Latin Christendom it became difficult to believe that our reason was suited to understand God's reasons and that our will, though damaged, was suited to follow God's will. The consequences of this developed variously: early on in psychology, by Peter Abelard; then in epistemology and political philosophy, by Duns Scotus and Marsilius of Padua; and later, in a more radical way, in the theology of Martin Luther. By Thomas Hobbes these tributaries had united into a single, formidable stream, which has flooded the intellectual currents running through the West since then. For our purpose it is sufficient to sketch something of the consequences of voluntarism upon our educational thought picking up the story only from the start of the last century. One surprising feature about this history is that, within the Anglo-American tradition at least, scepticism has often comfortably settled alongside dogmatic conclusions about the value of liberal democracy.

I take as my first example the work of John Dewey. As is well known, Dewey's singular influence over educational theory hardly finds an equal. In the past century within the English-speaking world virtually all accounts of the aims of education proceeded along the lines of argument established by Dewey, who sought to derive a philosophy of education consistent with democratic justice. As his preface to *Democracy and Education* (1916) explains, "The following pages endeavour to detect and state the ideas implied in a democratic society and to apply these ideas to the problems of the enterprise of

© The author 2008
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2008.00256.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

education."[12] Fifty years later, with the publication of British educational philosopher R.S. Peters's *Ethics and Education* (1966), the objective remained the same: pedagogical theory had only to make more explicit the implied educational norms presupposed within a democratic society.[13] Here there was certainly dogma. Philosophers of education, like everybody else, could assume a cultural consensus that united the justice of democratic institutions with the inevitability of scientific advance. But there was hardly need for a genuine search – either into metaphysics or into the history of their discipline. Faith in the advance of progress made such work redundant.[14]

Accepting Kant's critique of metaphysics and the tradition of positivist philosophy that inherited that critique, Dewey's idea of a liberal education had little in common with the aims of the older tradition of the liberal arts. Combining all the natural science, logical analysis, and literary appreciation you can, still did not add up either to what Christianity understood by philosophy or what Augustine outlined as the liberal arts. By way of contrast, the scholastic tradition, Dewey's immediate target of criticism, had defined *human* freedom as the movement of a rational soul, a soul endowed with a *free will* (*liberum arbitrium*). As St. Thomas had famously defined it, the will is a rational appetite reaching out towards ends perceived by the intellect as good. It is an appetitive power; but it is also intrinsically oriented towards the good and therefore an aspect of the intellect (cf. *ST* Ia q.83aa.1–3). Will and reason are integrated powers: the freedom of the one dependent upon the right exercise of the other. In contrast, for Dewey, ultimate human ends are closed to rationality and all that remains open to the intellect is reflection upon efficient causes, mere problem solving.

Which brings us to the present debate. That cultural confidence which long united the grand narrative of science and democracy within our civilization has now broken up. The new emphasis is on diversity: political theorists and educators today commonly presume that cultural pluralism best defines the present and preferred

[12] *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Free Press, [1916] 1966).

[13] R.S. Peters's *Ethics and Education* [1966] (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1970), see chapter 11 'Democracy and Education' and especially pp. 313ff.

[14] Dewey's belief in progress correlated with his utter disinterest in the history of educational thought and caused him to purport at numerous points false claims about that history which were subsequently repeated by others. The lack of engagement in the study of the history of educational philosophy has remained a marked feature among major educationalist scholars of the previous 30 years (such as R.S. Peters, P.H. Hirst, and John White). For illustrations of this see James R. Muir 'Is our History of Education mostly wrong?: The case of Isocrates', *Theory and Research in Education* 3:2 (July 2005), pp. 169–171.

© The author 2008
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2008.00256.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

assumption that is to be carried forward to every moral debate within which secular liberal societies.[15]

Certainly, even in the midst of our contemporary political fragmentation, not all accounts of the scope of education have been as narrow as Dewey's. Among educationists there remains a class of dissenting scholars which continues to defend the liberal arts based directly on classical Greek and Roman models of education. This type of defence, which I shall here presumptuously call 'non-Augustinian', seeks to interpret the tradition of the liberal arts apart from the distorting influence of Christianity. Under this class falls the work of Martha Nussbaum. In her recent essay on reform within higher education, *Cultivating Humanity: a classical defence for reform in liberal education*, Nussbaum argued that the strength of the liberal arts tradition (in America) lies in its ability to produce students capable of flourishing within a liberal democracy. Nussbaum shares with Dewey a confidence in the liberal principles of democratic justice, except, unlike Dewey, it is a Liberalism which is, in rhetoric at least, committed to the pursuit of no one definitive view of the good life. Rather, a multitude of visions of the good should be allowed to flourish, particularly those rooted in a cultural or sexual identity. Pluralism within the political community, so defined, ought to translate into pluralism within the educational curriculum. To this end she writes:

> Today's teachers are shaping future citizens in an age of cultural diversity and increasing internationalization. Our country is inescapably plural. As citizens we are frequently called upon to make decisions that require some understanding of racial and ethnic and religious groups in our nation, and of the situation of its women and its minorities in terms of sexual orientation . . . The new emphasis on 'diversity' in college and university curricula is above all a way of grappling with the altered requirements of citizenship, an attempt to produce adults who can function as citizens not just of some local region or group but also, and more importantly, as citizens of a complex interlocking world. (6)

Nussbaum's book documents the various ways which such reforms are being implemented across the United States. Nevertheless, as her evaluation of the administrative policies of both Notre Dame and Brigham Young University makes clear, not every kind of diversity,

[15] I understand the promotion of cultural pluralism to be synonymous with the promotion of multiculturalism, which Brian Barry defined aptly as "cultural relativism and accommodation of culturally distinctive groups" in 'Second Thoughts – and Some First Thoughts Reviewed', *Multiculturalism Reconsidered*, ed. Paul Kelly (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), p. 230.

© The author 2008
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2008.00256.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

in her view, is good.[16] Her book evaluates a number of religiously informed policies that she thinks incompatible with the vocation of the university. And in principle I do not object to Nussbaum's objecting to religious policies. Some of them may well be bad policies; and, as St. Augustine would say, not all religion is *true* religion. Nussbaum fails, however, to persuasively justify her principles of discrimination. She does not demonstrate how a religiously sceptical approach to education is inherently more rational than a religious one. Despite her many appeals to the classical tradition in general and to the Stoic idea of universal citizenship in particular, Nussbaum's 'universal reason' turns out to be a kind that conspicuously excludes the possibility of the Christian revelation.

The reader is initially surprised at the praise she offers John Paul II for his defence of the freedom of religion (cf. pp. 259 and 286). Continuing on, however, one begins to suspect insincerity. For at every point which Notre Dame has pursued policies that conform to Catholic moral teaching – that is to say, Catholic moral teaching as defined by the Vatican – on abortion (p. 269), contraception (p. 275), homosexuality (p. 277), and dissent in general (p. 268), Nussbaum charges the institution with damaging the conditions of free inquiry. Hindering free thought is a serious charge to make against a university and, in this case, it is not well founded. It would have been better for Nussbaum to state plainly that the Pope is simply inconsistent: that it is a contradiction *both* to defend religious freedom *and* to defend the permanent validity of moral truths. Alternatively, she might have claimed that the particular moral opinions which the Catholic Church teaches are false. Either line of attack would be more honest. As it is, I do not think Nussbaum's disagreement is with Notre Dame as an educational institution *per se*. It is, rather, with the Roman Catholic Church. Her disapproval of Notre Dame as a university extends only insofar as it attempts to function as a *Catholic* one.

In defence of a Catholic university, briefly, the Christian tradition has never been content to define 'intellectual freedom' in primarily negative terms.[17] True freedom, as the same Pope emphasised in his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (1993), is possible only when pursued in conformity with the truth. Truth is a good not opposed to freedom but constituting its very condition. And as it happens, in matters

[16] Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: a classical defence for reform in liberal education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). In chapter eight Nussbaum treats these two 'Religious Universities' under the headings 'The Study of non-Western Cultures', 'Ethnic and Racial Minorities', 'Women's Studies', and 'Homosexuality', to determine how successfully they promote genuine liberal education as she understands it.

[17] See John Haldane's *Faithful Reason: Essays Catholic and philosophical* (London: Routeledge, 2004), pp. 59–74 and Avery Dulles, S.J. *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1992), pp. 105–118 for good discussions of the nature and extent of academic freedom in relation to sources of ecclesial authority.

© The author 2008
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008
https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2008.00256.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

of faith and morals, truth is what the Catholic Church claims to know. The defence of truth and the protection of the freedom of conscience need not conflict. Quoting Newman, celebrating the dignity of the freedom of the individual's conscience properly formed, John Paul II wrote: "Conscience has rights because it has duties" (VS, 34). These are duties to the objective order of reality – apprehended through the natural law and, if one is a believer, revelation. Thus a Catholic institution, by definition, presupposes definite claims about the structure of ontology; Nussbaum's critique of a Catholic university's acceptance of these claims is disingenuous: the truth or falsity of an institution's philosophical and theological presuppositions has to be argued on other than the educational grounds Nussbaum covers. In short, what she delivers is not a critique of Notre Dame's educational policy but a complaint against its metaphysical starting point. Every school deploys some concept of freedom: Nussbaum simply disagrees with the ones deployed by universities striving to be Christian.

St. Augustine's contribution to the debate on Liberal Education

St. Augustine makes better sense of our own best aspirations for liberal education than do those who attempt to do so from outside of the Christian tradition. I conclude by highlighting in turn three themes within his early educational thought, expressed chiefly through his Cassiciacum dialogues, which are relevant to our current debates on the value of liberal education: Augustine's teaching on happiness as the goal of moral striving, his refutation of scepticism, and his outline of the principles of Christian pedagogy.

Beatos nos esse volumus.[18] All men desire happiness. Around this psychological axiom Augustine accounts for man's natural tendency towards philosophy and towards God. In the *De Beata Vita* and *Soliloquies* Augustine argues that the possibility of certain knowledge about God and the soul are the necessary conditions to human happiness. As Augustine would later recount in his *Confessions*, Cicero's philosophical framework could not provide so much. Under the strain of his personal moral failure and his inability to conceive of an immaterial good, reading the *Hortensius* turned Augustine not to philosophical theism but to Manichean materialism. Faced with the moral and epistemological contradictions in this position, and confronted with the plurality of competing claims to truth about God and its relation to the soul, Augustine for a time fell into scepticism.

The experience of 'diversity' within a political community is not unique to modern societies. And the sheer plurality of opinions about

[18] *De Beata Vita* 2.10.

© The author 2008
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2008.00256.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

what is important to include within an education tells us nothing about which is correct. Against his critics, Augustine's analysis of the value of knowledge in its relation to liberal education can accommodate for our experience of diversity. He will concede to Nussbaum and the pluralist that there exists a multiplicity of legitimate goods for humans to pursue. But he adds that these can and should be related to the highest good that human beings naturally seek, which is happiness in God.

In itself this conclusion does not lead us very far. It merely turns us back to the original site of disagreement that marked off ancient Christian and pagan answers to a common question: What is human happiness? Again, ours is not the only time which has been 'inescapably plural': the ancient world too knew multiple visions of the human good. There were alternate accounts of liberal education to Augustine's, the most famous being Martianus Capella's *De Nuptiis Philogiae et Mercurii*, an apology for the seven liberal arts. Pagan in its form it is intended as the basis for a universal education conceived apart from Christian revelation.[19] It was part of a broad and aggressive reassertion of pagan thought and religion throughout the Roman Empire at this time whose mounting energies reached a high pitch in the re-paganizing reforms of Emperor Julian the Apostate (A.D. 331–363) and in Symmachus' bid to restore the Altar of Victory to the Senate House (A.D. 384). In the midst of the pluralism of our own day we may restate, drawing upon Augustine's articulation of the problem and its solution, the central claim of Christian moral theology that man was made for happiness in God.

The second theme comes out his work *Contra Academicos*. Against the ancient sceptics Augustine argued that we know many things with certainty: we know that a whole is greater than its parts, that the universe is either one or many and that we know what we *perceive* objects to be. Then as now the real enemy to learning is not the darkness of ignorance but indifference. St. Thomas Aquinas remarks in his Treatise on Grace that sin damaged human psychology not primarily in its capacity to know the good but in its capacity to *desire* the good (cf. *ST* I-II q.109a.2). Thomas' insight here is thoroughly Augustinian. In Augustine's refutation of the Sceptics, it is not so much scepticism that Augustine feared in the young as the apathy that follows from it. Weakening the will's motive to search for truth, scepticism entails both indifference

[19] In his introduction to Martianus' work William Harris Stahl notes, "Martianus was himself such a gentleman, living in an age when the victory of Christianity over paganism was not yet complete. Longstanding rivalries between Christians and pagans, and the more recent successes of Christianity, had intensified the desire of pagans to undertake, as a social responsibility, the preservation of classical culture" in *Martianus Capella and the Seven Liberal Arts* Vol. I (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), p. 5.

© The author 2008
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2008.00256.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

and anarchy: two opposing passions set off by a common spiritual malady.

Augustine's sceptics are similar but not identical to our own.[20] Moderns tend to adopt, less consistently, an implied dualism in the order of ontology to accommodate for the success of natural philosophy. We feel on sure ground when we employ empirical or statistical methods but are less confident that argument can secure consensus regarding values. The wedge driven between science and wisdom in the 18th century split apart that once happy marriage between Facts and Values that left poets and philosophers ever since languishing for the enchanted world they once knew. Theologians too have suffered. Unable to overcome Kant's critique of knowledge, by the last quarter of the 20th century scepticism had begun to evode the confidence of many in the Church's tradition of moral theology. John Paul II's response to this was the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* where in a key passage he wrote:

> the root of these presuppositions [that demand the Church revise her fundamental moral teaching] is the more or less obvious influence of currents of thought which end by detaching human freedom from its essential and constitutive relationship to truth. (VS, 4)

John Paul warned that as our democratic civilization descends further into moral relativism it hastens its own collapse into tyranny. Moral inquiry, like every inquiry, is a search for the truth; it is only the shameless abandonment of hope which could lead one to conclude that truth can *never* be found. In short, on an Augustinian analysis systematic doubt is primarily a defect of the will, only secondarily is it an error of the intellect.

If at Cassiciacum Augustine was successful in defeating scepticism what did he think the liberal arts will help students to find? Not only that truth can be discovered but also that *it is valuable*. This proposition, which stands behind every sane intellectual pursuit, has been the object of direct attack within continental philosophy for over a century now. Announcing the theme of all subsequently Post-modern philosophy Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed not only that God was dead but also that we were better off not knowing it. Through his parable of the madman, Nietzsche introduced into the history of Modern philosophy the novel claim that truth is antagonistic to human flourishing.[21] Augustine's early educational work is a refutation of that claim. On philosophical grounds and by the authority of revelation man can be sure that the truth will set us free – to

[20] On this see Richard H. Popkin's, *The History of Scepticism*, second edition, (Oxford: OUP, 2001).

[21] Cf. *The Gay Science*, no.125, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 1.1, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*.

© The author 2008
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2008.00256.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

know and serve the living God. This is a timely contribution to our educational debates.

And yet, however significant this gain is for our day, we do well to avoid an error which Augustine in his early dialogues nearly fell into himself. That is, of expecting from the arts too much.

This brings us to the third theme, Christian pedagogy. Formal education is no substitute for religion.[22] At the opening of the *De Beata Vita* Augustine called the liberal arts the *portam ad philosophiam*. The liberal arts are the entry to philosophy, nothing more nothing less. They neither substitute for philosophy nor are they unrelated to it. What needs to be recovered, because it has been most neglected, is the Augustinian conception of the *value of education*. To use a phrase from the *De Doctrina Christiana*, the disciplines are 'keys.' They do not contain, they unlock. Through the order of the disciplines set out in his early dialogue, *De Ordine*, Augustine showed how the mind can be trained to move through the set of inductions proper to each discipline. Linguistic, empirical, then mathematical reasoning – this is the sequence of study most conducive to the student's early intellectual progress along the way to the science of God. For it is to the science of God that everything worthwhile leads. Hence, although there are economically and politically prudential reasons for promoting the Christian study of the liberal arts, the value of education is derived ultimately from its capacity to promote human happiness in God. And that happiness includes both the individual and social good of man in society.

In addition to the right sequence of study Augustine's pedagogical thought specified the on-going need for authority. For the young Augustine, philosophy is famously divided between a two-fold subject matter, God and the soul (*Soliloquies* 1.2.7). But the actual unification of the two is achieved only through human participation in the divine and holy mysteries of the Church. For an understanding of the mysteries of the faith, the philosophical Christian never advances beyond the stage of a beginner in this life. Independent knowledge is his goal; trust in divine authority remains the door to happiness.

Conclusion

It will be obvious that this Augustinian vision of the value of liberal education is incompatible with the presently dominant orientation in most universities. On the most credible secular view, literature, the arts, and the history of philosophy are studied primarily in relation to their value as works of man: as the best examples of human

[22] A mistake that I attribute to Alan Bloom – even though much of what he argued for in the *Closing of the American Mind* remains compatible with Augustine's educational thought.

© The author 2008
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2008.00256.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

attempts to answer permanent questions.[23] While there is indeed much to recommend study of the great works of literature and art it is clear that some conception of wisdom is required to discriminate between the many records of human achievement available.[24] It seems to me that the present dominance of the elective system is one symptom of our unwillingness to make proscriptive judgments about the value of such works. We are reluctant to speak about which books or in what order they should be presented to the student; we are reluctant to recommend a path along which the student's search for wisdom may proceed. Why is this? I think it is because we lack the moral confidence that there will be something worthwhile to find on the other side of four years of higher education. What other treasures, besides money and prestige, are we willing to promise our university grads? Specifically within the humanities, as a matter of academic policy, institutions often assume that greater diversity of course selection and methodologies promote the discovery of truth. But that policy is dubious. It too often assumes that the right program of study and the correct methodology in a given subject are a matter for endless debate. By failing to articulate the right ordering of liberal disciplines, universities burden students with a question that they themselves refuse to answer. The present ordering of knowledge encourages scholars to hide within the locked doors of their specialization with the hope that the question of the ordering of knowledge need never be asked. And it usually is not asked.

Let me draw these reflections to a close. Although the university currently reflects a plurality of conflicting notions about the *value* of higher education, we do continue to look to it as though it were capable of expressing, so I want to suggest, something of what is most noble in the tradition of liberal justice. But in our education as in our politics late modern liberalism has become an enigma to itself: it can no longer articulate a coherent justification for the principles it stirs us to defend. Having turned away from its intellectual and moral foundations in Christian theism it no longer knows *how* or *for what reason* it values the institutions that it does. And this is especially true of the university. In Augustine's early educational thought, however, I think we can find a way to make understandable John Paul II's call to Catholic universities:

> to unite existentially by intellectual effort two orders of reality that too frequently tend to be placed in opposition as though they were

[23] This view was made popular by Matthew Arnold; cf. his lecture 'Literature and Science' (1882) in Vol. X of *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold* ed. R.H. Super (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1974).

[24] This idea is developed in Alasdair MacIntyre's chapter 'Reconstituting University as an Institution and the Lecture as a Genre' in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (London: Duckworth, 1990), pp. 228–230.

© The author 2008
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2008.00256.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

> inimical: the search for truth and the certainty of already knowing the fount of truth.[25]

The search for truth and the certainty of knowing its source – these are the twin conditions which Augustine's early educational thought brings together. Echoing the language of the *Confessions,* the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* opens: "The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created for God and by God" (CCC, 27). Genuine liberal education, which seeks to direct and cultivate the full exercise of man's freedom, is possible only when it is ordered according to the knowledge of, among other things, the truth that man is created for God and by God. Education begins in wonder. It begins in wonder at the beauty of creation; it begins in wonder at the longing of our own hearts for completion. On Augustine's account, education begins in wonder and ends in wisdom. And wisdom about man is precisely that competency Christ entrusted to his Church. As Pope Paul VI said in an address before the General Assembly of the United Nations, the Church is an "expert in humanity".[26] Can we not trust her with our children's education? Acknowledging the Church's mission in the economy of salvation, Christian liberal education takes as its beginning the supposition that divinely revealed truth properly orders and illumines the study of all other disciplines.

This is, indeed, only a beginning. But I offer it as the first steps towards the recovery of a nobler view of education that corresponds to the true dignity of our vocation as teachers and as students, and more importantly, to our nature and destiny as human beings.[27]

Ryan N S Topping
St. Thomas More College
1637 College Dr.,
Saskatoon, SK
S7N OW6
Canada
Email: ryan.topping@theology.ox.ac.uk

[25] *On Catholic Universities* (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*), (Vatican City: Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 1990), 1. Although many Catholic universities have begun to initiate the institutional renewal called for in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, David Ruel Foster has perceptively argued that it is actually *Fides et Ratio* which has and will continue to have the most dramatic influence upon the reform of Catholic higher education. Where the first is directed toward administrators the second, because of its challenge to the philosophical scepticism which was presupposed in many of the institutional decisions taken by Catholic institutions during the 1960's, is directed toward faculty; cf. 'The Implications of *Fides et Ratio* for Catholic Universities', in David Ruel Foster and Joseph W. Koterski, S.J., eds., *The Two Wings of Catholic Thought: Essays on* Fides et Ratio (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), pp. 109–112.

[26] Given on 4 October 1965 and quoted by John Paul II in VS, 4.

[27] I would like to thank Prof. Carl Still and Fr. John Saward for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

© The author 2008
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2008.00256.x Published online by Cambridge University Press