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The Moral Collapse of the University

by Bruce Wilshire

*“We are enveloped
by the world not only
spatially but temporally
—caught up, empow-
ered, given room in
that which is coming
from some source and
going somewhere.”*

An upper-level administrator at the university telephoned me at home. I had been repairing something in the basement, and my hand, I saw, left a smear of grease on the phone. The administrator asked me about a fellow professor who was a candidate for a deanship; he had served for a time as an associate dean. What did I think of him?

I was unprepared. The call was completely unexpected. Knowing I had to say something, I began by itemizing his attractive traits. It was not just that this was the civil thing to do, but that I had a clear picture of what these traits were, whereas the negative ones, I had never been able to focus clearly. What was the reservation that brooded like a cloud around my thoughts but would not coalesce in a definite image?

I went on with the positive traits. Yes, he was a bright person, industrious, well prepared in his scholarly specialty, got on well with his colleagues, did not flaunt his power and use it in a coercive or a condescending manner, and had a certain human touch—in the sense that he could shift gears when pressure was building in a situation and relief was needed.

The administrator agreed and paused expectantly.

What was my reservation? I tried to buy time with any words which might conceivably be relevant. The reservation in the background would not crystallize into a figure. He waited expectantly, sensing there was more I wanted to say.

Suddenly the answer came—in the form of an emphatic image: boxes with numbers in them. In the Activity Reports which we professors must submit at the end of each year, there are boxes for numbers to quantify our “productiv-

ity.” For example, following, “How many books have you published in the last five years?” is a box. The candidate for the deanship had a comprehensive and precise knowledge of the numbers in these boxes—but I think he grasps little beyond the numbers themselves, I said. He does not grasp what the numbers in the boxes refer to in the world of human intercourse and activity, what the numbers mean. What does it mean, in human terms, to write one of that sort of thing—book—any book? Then, faced with the question, “How many books have you written in the last five years?” how would he judge the difference between one professor’s answer when “One” refers to a slim volume of great imaginative power which may change the course of civilization, and another’s answer of “Two” which refers to scholarly, well-reviewed, but pedestrian books? It seemed to me that he does not know the difference between the numbers, because he does not know the difference between the books to which the numbers refer.

The administrator made no sound, so I went on.

I said the candidate was brilliant at assembling “hard data” on personnel, and I talked about other boxes. He knows, I said, the number for “How many citations of Professor X’s work by professional peers in that academic field have occurred ‘in the literature’ in the last year.” But why, I asked, do we place confidence in this number? Do we forget that much of the most creative work has gone unrecognized at the time? Some thinkers die unnoticed, others are vilified in their lifetimes. How would they have fared in the boxes of our Activity Reports?

The administrator was himself an historian, and I thought that last point would impress him. But he made no sound, and I rushed to say something else. We ought to remember also, I said, that Socrates and Jesus seem not to have written or published anything. It is immensely

difficult to find numbers to evaluate achievement in teaching. I didn’t think that the candidate had any notion of how to judge important contributions teachers make.

With this a vast and tempting region opened. It contained all the issues we seldom discuss, do not know how to evaluate precisely, and have

The self cannot be divorced from its evaluation of itself.

no boxes for. What is the point of educating people in the first place? Because it is good that we be developed in this way. Goodness? But how could I talk about goodness in the few moments given me to answer his question about the candidate?

I faltered and hesitated, longing to leap into this area, but knowing it was hopeless to try. He quickly interposed, thanked me for my efforts, remained noncommittal, and closed the conversation.

I returned to the basement, and soon a suspicion became a conviction. Probably the administrator was himself only interested in the numbers in the boxes and would feel that nobody in an administrative capacity or outside



a particular academic field could hope to know what the numbers in the boxes referred to, what a book or an article meant—and probably that the outsider ought not even to try to grasp this, for that might derail the fragile coordination necessary for the survival of the many-armed and many-headed thing that the university is.

I became depressed.

This situation cannot be blamed simply on the ignorance or laziness of certain administrators. An underlying reason why business is done in shorthand, the numbers confined in their boxes, is that the university research to which the numbers refer falls into disconnected sectors. All academic fields presuppose truth, otherwise why try to discover anything? Scientists conceive of truth in a narrow, technical sense which is linked to their ability to make quantifiable predictions and to test them with precision instruments. This has proven to be highly productive for science. But what of the claim that there is truth to be discovered also in literature, for example? Typically such “truths” do not involve quantifiable predictions which can be tested with precision



instruments, so the single word *truth* cannot hide a disparity of meaning which prevents the different fields from connecting or even contrasting their discoveries.

Yet all of us knowers and researchers in our different academic departments are in the business of educating ourselves and our students. Education involves a simple but basic assumption: that the self cannot be divorced from its evaluation of itself. “Where do I stand in the world?” “What has my life amounted to?” “What might I become?” So if we cannot compare and connect the discoveries we knowers and researchers make, we are hampered, even crippled in our role as educators, because we cannot orient ourselves and our students in the world. With only bits and pieces of knowledge we risk getting lost, unguided by what in truth is good for us to become.

In literature, and in the fastnesses of experience—religious experience, for example—the term *good* “talks” to us on the inner level of the self. But it cannot be taken in as a whole by science and defined in the required precise and predictive sense; so it cannot figure in the truths scientists discover. Science by itself cannot tell us how to educate, not even how to educate as persons those who are to be scientists. In fact, although science is considered the paramount way of knowing, it cannot establish what nearly everyone assumes: that it itself is good.

If we cannot know whether what we do is good for human beings, we cannot be confident in our evaluation of ourselves as educators. It is understandable that we be captivated by boxes full of numbers floating on a page.

My conversation with the administrator occurred in 1972. Since then the conviction has spread that something is wrong with our research universities as educational institutions. Because we are growing, developing beings we ask questions about who we are and what we

ought to become that the highly specialized and partitioned university can find no place within itself to raise and consider. There are university newspapers and magazines. There are also faculty meetings, but these and the printed organs seldom provide a place for communication about education because the vocabularies of those involved mix defectively. Typically, faculty meetings are preoccupied with procedural matters—problems of coordinating modules connected only bureaucratically.

The various parts of the great university stand out, clearly and boldly outlined. But when I search within them (the departments within the colleges, the colleges within the university, the administration buildings, classroom buildings, stadia, libraries, dorms, milling students), trying to find a place within the scene to ask the questions about goodness that seem so essential, I cannot find it. Amidst all the reality of the university there is no place for the reality of the questions or of the questioner. Consequently the components of the university, as I experience them, float away—one at a time or in bunches—like items in a dream, or components of a surrealistic movie set being flown around by a giant crane. Each of the parts has a clear definition and can be picked out, but the university itself, the vital unit, disappears.

There is a cry for change, and interdisciplinary programs spring up in nearly every university; faculty committees are assembled to pick a “core curriculum”: what every educated person should know. We are caught up in transition. But the causes of the university’s illness are systemic and obscure, I think, historical and institutional, and tied in with our most obscure assumptions about the nature of truth and knowledge, and of the self and world to be known. Causes most difficult to discover! Why do we now conceive truth and knowledge in a way that obscures



sectors of our own selves? As Nietzsche put it, “We knowers are unknown to ourselves.”

As directly lived, the world is not experienced as divided into boxes, but as one vast, supremely great whole. Attention abstracts and selects, from a moody and vague background, an immediate sense of the encompassing world and ourselves in it—lingering, habitual orientations for living, inherited from archaic personal or communal pasts. This background may be vague, but if we are to feel solid and real it must be felt to be coherent. Marginally but potently sensed as background of all we are and do, the world exudes a pervasive, moody

Something is wrong with our research universities as educational institutions.

meaning and quality: if it is odious and fearsome to me, I will live in a withdrawn and fearful way; if attractive and supportive, I will live confidently. As we form meaning in interaction with the englobing world, present both in the focus of our attention and in the abiding and moody background, we form ourselves.

As if it were a laser focusing attention randomly, the university cuts across and eclipses



the human background. It cannot facilitate the education of human beings who thrust toward integrated, vital being within a horizon of possibility. What lies in the background of the university itself that explains its obscuration and pulverization of our experience?

The new human institution which burst on the world scene with such momentous impact, the great research university, *is* old at heart. For it is in the knowledge business, and the conception of knowledge which it accepts largely determines its institutional structure and its conception of the knowers. In a real sense, it finds no room for us as integral beings in an integral world, for as it grasps us it splits us into minds and bodies.

Through a leap of abstraction from the immediately lived world—a leap which is made and then forgotten—the world is divided by 17th-century thought into material bodies and weightless minds, objective and subjective. The 20th-century university is fractured into sciences and humanities, with only the former thought to deliver objective meaning and truth. Thoughts about goodness, or beauty, tend to be reduced to mere expressions of subjective sentiment and opinion. What is abstracted from, the supremely singular background world, is ignored. But only within this can a

life be one life, integral, valuable, meaningful, as an immediately lived whole opening onto the future.

In a brilliant chapter of his *The Abolition of Man*—"Men Without Chests"—C. S. Lewis points out the split made in persons committed to psycho-physical dualism, and to the history-less view of reality as point-instant ideas inherited from the 17th century. As we tend to conceive ourselves, human reality is located either in the head—in consciousness—or in the stomach or groin. There is nothing in between, no locus in the chest for the moral virtues, which are neither purely physical nor purely mental, but human rather, the *heart* of a complex creature who must be grounded and rooted in some way in human history and the continuous background of the world. For Greek thought the moral virtues are located in the chest: courage, piety, temperance, wisdom, justice.

Without energy and empowerment the moral virtues are ineffectual, and it is just the heart that supplies this, for it involves us in the immediately lived, engulfing world, bonding us emotionally to others and our common fate. Without heart we are not plugged in to the

Thoughts about goodness, or beauty, tend to be reduced to mere expressions of subjective sentiment and opinion.

dynamism of all that lives and endures around us; and the heart does have reasons that the reason knows nothing of. Verbalisms and formulae generate power technologically, but that is not sufficient. We also need directly engaged presence, and the sensuous images of presence which stay embedded in our bodies.

The shaman knows something that the technologist forgets at his—and our—peril.

Vaguely and archaically, but fundamentally, we are enveloped by the world not only spatially but temporally—caught up, empowered, given room in that which is coming from some source and going somewhere. This experience is now threatened by a technologized and profession-

Persons wonder if they can know themselves, and if they can direct themselves intelligently.

alized culture in which attention is focused on objects to be manipulated for some immediately understandable gain, rather than on the surrounding world moving us—a fixed and constricted attention in which numbers easily lose their ties to the actuality and presence of what is numbered and afloat in their boxes.

To put it starkly, modern history begins in the 17th century with the death of history as previously conceived: “his-story,” humankind’s attempts to make sense of it all in terms of fundamental feelings, stories, and images—”mythological” accounts—of the ever-recurring order of everything. This pervasive, continuous, emotional storytelling, spinning the fabric of the person’s and the group’s identity, tended to be equated with superstition, fairy tales, mere myths.

We detect the fundamental irony of the modern world since Newton and Descartes, which affects the university in a crucial way: A sure foundation is supplied for mathematical, mechanistic physics, and on this basis technologies of all kinds are grounded, and in the space of only a few centuries the whole earth and our lives are transformed—the other animals driven

into obscure corners or annihilated. Yet, at the same time, persons wonder whether they can know themselves and whether they can direct themselves intelligently and achieve meaning, self-respect, dignity.

As 17th-century science deposits itself in our lives today, it paves over but cannot replace the common matrix of prescientific storytelling and image making which supplied orientation, moral guidance, energy, and worth for countless generations knit up as integral beings within an integral world. But they were more than stories, since they were not contrasted invidiously to scientific truth. For example, Penelope’s faithfulness in waiting years for Ulysses, or David’s courage in facing Goliath. These images of faithfulness and courage, taken in habitually, inform and gird the self, imparting to it solidity and continuity.

Along with this perpetual storytelling was the practice of the traditional healing arts, which involved the most intimate and trusting contact between the individual and the community. However defective these arts might have been—understood scientifically—they imparted continuity and meaning to the community and its members. And in some cases they may have produced cures we can no longer imagine.

Human reality, self-knowledge, truth, goodness? These are philosophical



questions. Don't we have professional philosophers ready to handle them? It is symptomatic of the university's malaise, its distance from the common concerns of humans to build lives for themselves, that philosophers tend to be isolated in highly technical, verbalistic communication with

Make sense of the world and our place within it—nothing else matters!

professional fellows. The complexity and expertness of their language is the problem. Engrossed in it, questions about its scope and competence are masked out. Truth tends to be construed as a property of accurate statements, ones that can be manipulated in complex arguments. But is self-knowledge and self-direction mainly a matter of making true statements about ourselves and arguing? It is preposterous to think so.

To be educators is to seek some minimal community and aim, some shared practice and basic vocabulary, and to require of philosophy some special contribution to this.

At the end of the last century, coincidentally with the formation of modern universities along scientific lines established since the 17 century, William James wrote of the "scientific nightmare": In the ordinary nightmare we have motives but no power. In the scientific nightmare we have power but no motives ("Rationality, Activity, and Faith," 1882). That is, we now have great power and can work technological wonders, but why do anything when we cannot know whether the ends to which we direct our power are really good? The danger is to fall either into compulsive,

frenzied effort or into paralysis and boredom. (James' observation did not deter university builders.)

If we cannot make sense of the world and our place within it and find something good and joyous about being alive, then nothing else matters. All desires pale beside this one, and if the price for meaning is the relinquishment of subsidiary desires we will pay this price, won't we? At least it is a question. For we possess the capacity to freely suppress desires if necessary, and ego and wishful thinking on occasion, and to stand by whatever truth we discover—no matter how strange or repellent it may seem—which is pertinent to being fully alive.

To exercise this capacity to freely seek truth, and to take responsibility for holding to it, is making sense of our lives, isn't it; is self-respect, is being fully alive? How can we respect ourselves if we find nothing that takes us out of ourselves—nothing we revere for its wholeness, inclusiveness, greatness, and to which we might belong? Mustn't we know in our hearts what goodness is? But can we? We have powerful means of altering the earth and ourselves, but only a fix on goodness could give our means their aim, support, and meaning—give *us* meaning. What can we reasonably expect of the university in this time of need?

I believe that education is a moral enterprise and that the contemporary research university lacks moral direction. Amidst all our stunning discoveries we have forgotten, I think, what it means to be a human being in the world. Also of course what it means to be a good one. We tend to treat ourselves and our students abstractly, as if we were divided into bodies and minds. With this goes a heartless bureaucracy, modules of the university boxed up in themselves: the administration takes the body—it houses, feeds, shuttles bodies about—the faculty takes the minds—it pumps into them information and

techniques, and spends much of its time looking beyond the university altogether, seeking authorization from professional peers nationwide.

Split up, unrecognized as whole persons, many undergraduates feel alienated from their professors. In a survey of 5000 conducted by the Carnegie Foundation 52 percent stated that they were “treated like numbers in a book” and 42 percent did not believe that their professors were personally interested in their progress. I believe that this poll underestimates alienation, for many students have never known a good educational experience—imaginative, supportive, stimulating, crackling with intelligence—so that they have nothing to which to compare their experience. And students cannot be alienated from professors without professors being alienated from students.

If we would restore the university to its educational and moral course we must rethink what it means to be a human being. We must plot the course that science and technology have followed—and professionalism and bureaucracy (even in the university); this drifting belief that we cannot achieve meaning and truth about the human condition as a whole, that we can tell no life-forming story about what we are



and what we ought
be that is compat-
ible with truth
(we are not

talking about fairy tales, but a way of knowing that can be imaginative). This means that we cannot make sense of ourselves as beings who can freely form ideas and take responsibility for whatever truth we find; that we cannot make sense of ourselves sucked into the vacuum of possibility—that vacuum essential to our substance. If Nietzsche is right, this is unfaithfulness to ourselves, a wild “creativity,” an urge for destruction.

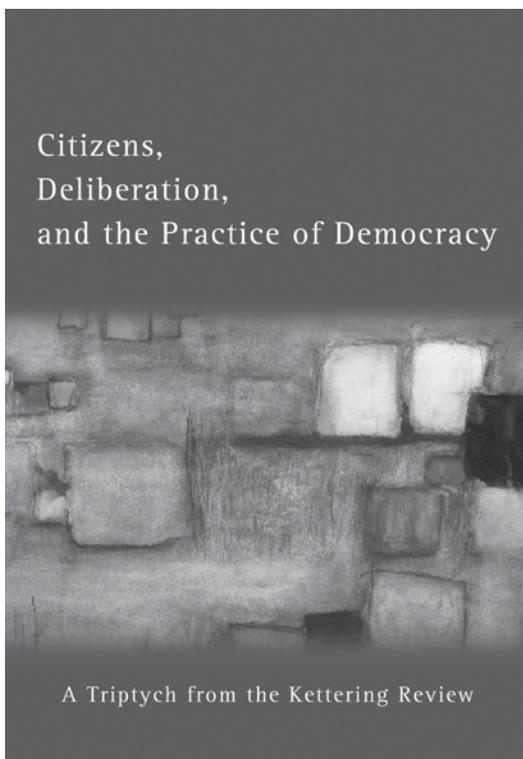
In sum I argue that the self’s identity is formed through basic engagements and bondings in the world, whether these are acknowledged or not. The recognitions professors get from professionalized academic authorities, model knowers, contribute crucially to the matrix formative of self. At the same time, they conceal the depth and scope of the matrix. Behind “current standards of professional competence,” archaic energies of identity formation are at work. When professors are accepted into professional groups, primitive initiation and purification rites are performed unacknowledgeably which establish individual and corporate identity by contrasting members invidiously to outsiders. But to be cut off from others, especially those whom we generate, our children and our students, is to be cut off from ourselves as adults and teachers, and from a possibility of our own regeneration. Evading awareness of what we are doing is evading responsibility to our larger ongoing community; this is unfaithfulness both to others and ourselves. It is destructive.

Bruce Wilshire, is professor emeritus of philosophy at Rutgers University. This essay is drawn from his 1990 book, The Moral Collapse of the University: Professionalism, Purity, and Alienation, with permission from the State University of New York.



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