

On University Excellence: Reflections from Berkeley

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THE INTELLECTUAL UNREST sweeping through American universities largely reflects a liberal ideology purporting to embody all the correct attitudes towards contemporary issues now needed by our institutions of higher learning. In California a rapidly changing population resulting from new patterns of immigration has exacerbated liberal demands for sweeping changes in racial attitudes towards non-Caucasian academics. Much turmoil over affirmative action, faculty hiring, curricular changes, and other multicultural problems has taken place in Berkeley at the University of California, where campus protests, including the disruption of classes, have attempted to assert the infallibility of liberal positions on all ethnic issues.

In this troubling situation the continued overall functioning of the University presents increasing challenges for the administration. It must take into account the demands of a predominantly left-wing student body and a large number of like-minded faculty members intent upon securing ever more racial diversity, together with a state legislative concern, shared by the Regents, that the University adopt policies reflecting the increasingly diversified population of the state. At the same time the administration is

aware that for more than a hundred years traditional attitudes towards education gave little consideration to ethnic issues yet brought the University of California so much honor and esteem that it has long been ranked as one of the foremost universities in the world.

But, as is everywhere stressed, times are swiftly changing and higher education must accommodate itself to this fact. Already some years ago the University of California decided that augmenting the diversity of students, faculty, and fields of study would insure continued excellence and placate liberal voices. At present, however, the faculty at Berkeley is still about 90% Caucasian and that, Chancellor Chang-Lin Tien bluntly states, has to be changed.¹ Hiring of faculty members is to depend to an even greater degree not only upon race but also upon feminist demands for more women faculty members. Obviously, many excellent scholars, research workers, teachers, and other staff members at Berkeley who are best qualified for the positions they hold are members of ethnic minorities and/or women. In most fields of study, however, the qualities of academic excellence are independent of race and gender, and in insisting upon such irrel-evancies to replace or supplement the

criterion of merit in faculty hiring, the University risks lowering its standards.

Preferential ethnic treatment of student applicants for admission may also lower standards. Even though white and Asian applicants repeatedly achieve higher grade point averages and scholastic aptitude scores than do those of other ethnic groups, the University does not admit them on such criteria alone in order to avoid a student body comprising nearly all whites and Asians. With far more applicants than can be admitted, the admissions program supplements its criterion of scholastic achievement with a policy of affirmative action which may racially discriminate against white high school graduates academically eligible to study at Berkeley. However, as former Chancellor Ira Michael Heyman recently stated, since no single ethnic group in California will be in the majority by the year 2000, there is no choice "but to select and prepare our future leaders from the brightest and most able of all ethnic groups."²

Current changes in the curriculum also reflect the administration's compliance with the liberal proclivity to minimize or degrade the contributions of Western civilization and to elevate those of non-western cultures. Although for the baccalaureate degree some basic knowledge of American history and institutions is required (a requirement that can be met by passing certain high school courses), now in order to graduate from the University of California a student will be required to pass one of more than one-hundred new courses, each of which deals with at least three of five cultural groups. The African/American, Asian/American, American Indian, Chicano/Latino, and European/American contributions are thus assumed to be equally important in American higher education. According to the liberal ideology pervading the Berkeley campus, each of the five cultural groups offers its own unique

perspective on the historical and cultural development of this nation and accordingly deserves equal curricular consideration. It is expected that the new facts and vistas to emerge will satisfy both teachers and students of this University. Undoubtedly, this new approach will also add to the sum of universal knowledge with which any university is properly concerned.

The fact nevertheless remains that the University of California is a product of Western civilization, including the West's ties to Judaeo-Christian religious traditions. A university's historical roots, cultural and religious heritage, and geographical location all have natural roles to play in its overall functioning. Just as an educational institution in Japan or China, steeped in the cultural traditions in which it functions, is best able to teach about the flowering of Japanese or Chinese civilization with Asian-centered curricula, a university in this country needs a curriculum which includes required courses in the European civilization out of which it was born. Educated Americans need to know, for example, that the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights reflect the insights of Western minds guided by biblical teachings. Nor should they forget that down to the end of the nineteenth century the forward growth of this nation was accomplished through the guidance of European-Americans; during this time the American Indian and Negro populations constituted but small, voiceless minorities, while non-European immigrants did not arrive in significant numbers until the beginning of the twentieth century and not from Asian countries until after World War II.

Regardless of the many transgressions and failures of Western thought in the formation of the United States of America, it has left its indelible mark upon us with prodigious accomplishments. Students who now delight in denigrating the West

have for the most part chosen to be educated at universities which originated directly or indirectly in the American colonies as Anglo-Saxon institutions. Yet they deem it arrogant, unfair, or racist when these universities wish to retain a Eurocentric focus upon pride of place and heritage derived from their own history and achievements. It is to be hoped that the growing number of Asians at the University of California, whose forefathers played no role in its early formative days, will acquire a more sensitive understanding of the dismay with which some native Californians witness in the name of racial pluralism the gradual arrogation of the institution their white forefathers founded and built. For the first time in the history of the University, white undergraduate students are in the minority on the Berkeley campus. If colorblindness is to facilitate the quest for university excellence, it must never conceal the historical truth that most of the founders and builders of American educational institutions were highly intelligent and idealistic white, Anglo-Saxon, Christian males.

Chancellor Tien has stated that "Excellence and diversity are not mutually exclusive; they are extremely interdependent."³ According to one critical faculty member, however, the University has so successfully promulgated the doctrine that excellence is inseparable from diversity that this has become an article of faith no longer questioned by the majority on the campus.⁴ Fortunately a dissenting minority, weary of all this political correctness, questions the view that the highest excellence of which the University is capable is synonymous with, or automatically ensured by, diversity.

The customary meaning of to excel implies an order of increasingly good things surpassed in value or merit by the best at its summit. The University's current policy, however, does not seek the excellence of the best. It only seeks such

excellence as can be achieved by students, faculty, and curricula compelled to represent ever more completely the ethnic diversity of the state of California. This is a self-imposed restriction on university education. Can it be rectified?

In discussing this possibility, let us cite another statement by Chancellor Tien: "I don't see in the future how you can reach the highest level of excellence without first tackling the diversity question. We have to educate the future leaders who will need the background to handle the multicultural and multi-ethnic world." Tackling the problem of diversity first was just what the University did in its American Cultures Program, a far-reaching plan for curricular changes which took 18 months to complete. Based on the assumption that the issue of ethnic diversity cannot be adequately addressed through the creation of a few new courses, the American Cultures Breadth Requirement of 1989 represents a major restructuring of the curriculum. The subject of American cultural diversity is to be incorporated into around 30 disciplines, each contributing to a total of more than 100 new courses to insure "the emergence of a new intellectual orientation in the teaching and study of American cultures."⁵

Interdisciplinary penetration of educationally innovative ideas in order to elevate levels of university excellence is highly commendable. I suggest, however, that starting with the problem of diversity may quite possibly have been the wrong way to proceed. Had there instead been 18 months of focus upon the nature of excellence rather than diversity, more understanding of both issues might have been reached, including the view that more is at stake than promoting a more culturally diverse curriculum and seeking more racially diverse people to engage in first-rate scholarship, teaching, and research to achieve academic honors.

John Henry Newman stated in the last century that no human enterprise could be higher or nobler than founding a university because it embraces universal knowledge and tries to maintain the proper relation between all fields of study, blending them into one establishment. Newman's voice comes down to us from an England where problems of race and gender at universities were almost non-existent, but it is not outdated. For Newman had much to say about university excellence and did so superbly to lay bare the quintessential cutting edge. This he was able to do by "pushing things up to their first principles," without which the challenges of contemporary academic debate cannot be adequately met.

In essence Newman questioned the excellence of the education then provided by universities which, as now, was based upon the quest for, and the dissemination of, universal knowledge and the acquisition of intellectual proficiency in a wide variety of selected courses of study. In this learning experience he saw a serious deficiency in that it often neglected as irrelevant sentiment or private opinion the subject of religion. And as a Catholic convinced that the scope and nature of university education rests upon an underlying theocentricity, he maintained that "religious truth is not only a portion, but a condition of general knowledge" and that to blot it out is "nothing short. . . of unravelling the web of university education."⁶ In his view all aspects of the universal knowledge that is sought and taught at institutions of higher learning have a common spiritual significance by which they are bound together into a unified, coherent whole. Today serious reflection on the highest levels of university excellence can lead in the same direction.

Many will vehemently disagree. In an age of secularism, scientific objectivity and amorality, separation of church and state, religious freedom, civil rights, and

multiculturalism can it really be maintained that positing a spiritual and theocentric relation between all fields of academic endeavor is essential to a university's pursuit of the highest excellence? I think it can. One need not be a Catholic nor even a Christian to realize that Newman, like many great minds before him, saw man's search for universal knowledge taking on a higher excellence in so far as it recognizes the existence of a transcendent reality inseparably related to evolving human life and its search for truth and beauty and virtue.

Where, then, does this leave the campus atheists, agnostics, and all the rest who consider their own religious convictions or lack of them in no way pertinent to their fields of study? It could leave them at the cutting edge, too. For what is envisaged here is not a state-supported university entering the exclusive realm of Catholicism or any other orthodox religious faith. Nor does it involve the objective attitude of mind exemplified in statements about courses in religious studies currently offered at the University of California which involve "the methodological approaches to the study of religion such as sociology of religion and psychology of religion and courses that examine thematic issues and cross-cultural phenomena such as myth, ritual, transformative experience, and comparative ethics,"⁷ however valuable this approach may be for viewing religious faiths from a global, multicultural perspective. It involves rather an intellectual pushing up of education to its first principles, which can be attempted by any inquiring mind able to break out of some of the more restrictive confines of orthodox religion, science, and academia to glimpse the grander evolutionary surge of living things. Even in a secular, materialistic age an educated person can sense that the surge is somehow flowing towards the sacred and that he or she is accordingly obligated to seek the spiritual

truths which illumine the whole evolutionary process. And in doing so one finds that the transcendental focus is also of subjective import because it leads directly to questions of morality and the virtuous life. It cannot be otherwise, for the sacred must be inseparable from the Good from which all human good is derived.

A pronounced moral approach to education might embrace more religious wholeness than Newman, with his exclusive commitment to Christianity, envisaged. The word religion literally means a turning back towards one's source, which can be facilitated through the basic teachings not only of Christianity and Judaism but also of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, or any other religious faith or religious philosophy recognizing that our moral sense is not man-made but has its origin in transcendent reality. Although moral enlightenment is amply provided by any one of these religious outlooks, human beings may be seeking at this stage of their development a universal religion better able to provide an evolutionary understanding of the questions of good and evil and the human and the divine.

To foster awareness of the natural convergence of universal religion, universal knowledge, and universal moral law was a goal of ancient educational institutions. From Plato's academy onwards, education in the West tried to give to the farthest reaches of the human intellect the spiritual vision that helps to realize ethical potentiality. It was thought imperative that the educated human being become increasingly proficient in distinguishing between good and evil through awareness that because a divine ethic exists man is obligated to seek it all the days of his life.

The prevailing view that knowledge amenable to objective scientific proof constitutes the most fundamental and valid kind has effectively curtailed academia's interest in spiritual truths. Most universities regard them merely as

subjective opinions to which everyone is entitled without interference so long as there is no attempt at religious indoctrination in classrooms where "real" knowledge is being considered. The current General Catalogue of the University of California at Berkeley states that "since the University is a state-supported institution, it does not offer chapel services or religious activity on campus." But if academic access to universal knowledge is restricted by fear of overstepping the secular pale, the twentieth century has need to reconsider the nature of university excellence and the goals of university education. Indoctrination, after all, essentially means to imbue with learning, and faculty members might enhance the learning process were they to teach their specialized fields of knowledge in the widest evolutionary context—as but minute parts of the universal knowledge that includes a background of spiritual truths and moral laws able to transform the knower into a more highly educated human being.

Our scientific-technological world has, however, insisted upon secularism, objectivity, amorality, and atheism or agnosticism as educational conditions for the dissemination of knowledge. Academia has long since abandoned man's search for a divine ethic because its very existence was ignored, doubted, or denied. Universities now educate our future leaders by helping them to achieve a high degree of intellectual proficiency in their chosen fields of study but without requiring them to consider the spiritual and moral expansion of their minds as an obligation of the educated.

The woes of the twentieth century reflect the indubitable failure of secular education. Institutions of higher learning are not preparing men and women to dissipate the moral confusion of our times because there is no consensus on the existence of an absolute, unchanging morality or standard of ethical conduct,

especially when falling outside the domain of political correctness. Some college students now admit that in order to obtain higher grades they are in the habit of cheating during examinations but do not seem to regard this as a dishonorable practice. At the administrative level the scandal involving millions of dollars of federal research funds privately used has brought irreparable dishonor to Stanford University, while some liberal academics, with banter and witticism, appear to take such conduct lightly. Other distinguished universities, including, unfortunately, the University of California, have been reported to have engaged in similar practices involving varying degrees of misappropriation of funds.

In the third century the Alexandrian philosopher Plotinus spoke about the relationship between intelligence and virtue, and a modern classical scholar observes that

It would be anachronistic and wrong to consider his thought, or that of any other late Greek philosopher, in terms of that dissociation of moral and intellectual concerns characteristic of our own way of thinking, which would lead us to consider it absurd and impertinent, for instance, to inquire closely into the degree of moral virtue possessed by a candidate for a Chair of philosophy and to require him, if he was even put on the short list, to be free of envy and ambition and indifferent to such worldly considerations as the salary scale. Plotinus, like most Greek philosophers, thought that a philosopher ought to be an extremely good as well as an extremely intelligent man, and did not believe that true intelligence was possible without virtue, or true virtue without intelligence.⁸

Academia may one day find such a view neither wholly anachronistic nor wholly wrong. In their quest to improve education, universities are bound to encounter the ancient view that human life is seeking moral as well as intellectual ex-

cellence, and they will then be faced with the question of moral criteria. Are they solely dependent upon the human mind, as the secularists claim, or are they a response of the conscience to divine authority? Accommodation to the prevailing secular ideology that discounts the role of the sacred in academic endeavor prevents intellectual and spiritual consciousness from working in unison to approach the higher levels of university excellence. At these levels our moral sense becomes purer and more discerning as spiritual truth about justice, fairness, honesty, honor, courage, sensitivity, self-restraint, kindness, and compassion becomes more accessible to the mind.

Truths of another kind emerge as universities become more racially diverse, but academic minds having greater access to multicultural particulars do not necessarily create excellence at the higher levels. More multicultural truths have not even ensured an ethnically tolerant Berkeley campus. Racial tensions might be more easily averted were there more academics interested in pushing education up to its first principles for the sake of universal moral values. Any skin color will do. For every human being, regardless of race, has a conscience trying to subdue its egoistic inclinations and thereby reach an ever more perfect alignment with the moral law of the cosmos. This basic spiritual striving to know what binds the worldly particulars together is, I believe, what university excellence is all about. Most educators would not agree. The University of California still assumes that racial differences are of the utmost significance in the education of future leaders of a racially diverse world. The diversity that now so overwhelms the academic mind is not, however, of the essence. Of much greater importance for higher education and the world is to seek out and help realize the potentials for moral good that

are common to every human being.

To reach the highest levels of university excellence will thus require a new focus on education. If, as many believe, we now stand at the threshold of a new world order, we could be witnessing the unleashing of spiritual forces powerful enough to dominate all human endeavors. Certainly in a more spiritual world true education will be conceived as a union of knowledge, intelligence, and the moral sense that is derived from man's relation to the divine. Educators will then have no choice but to consider what religious faiths and philosophies down through the ages have found the morally good life to be.

One possibility for already diverting the academic mind in this direction would be to consider a restructuring of the university curriculum through the establishment of a variety of required courses dealing with the history of human thought about virtuous conduct in relation to religion and evolution. Suggesting such a step does not imply that academia is now in possession of the truth about the nature and origin of morality and is therefore the final authority on the right and wrong conduct of human life. No one has that full knowledge we all seek. Nor does it imply that the Socratic question of whether or not virtue can be taught has finally been resolved by the academic mind. The step is suggested because mankind now seems to have reached a crucial stage in its development where its educated intelligence, unrestrained by any prevailing sense of the moral order, urgently needs to know what it now ought to do—and it is believed that institutions of higher learning have a leading role to play in restoring virtue to the center of the intellectual debate. An interdisciplinary penetration of moral and ethical thought into all aspects of university life could bring about a new intellectual orientation based upon a coherent unity of

spirit. And it is expected that any spiritually unified quest for excellence would achieve its goal (and at the same time dispel racial tensions) more effectively than accommodation to liberal insistence that ever more ethnic diversity means ever more university excellence.

Another suggestion is that the university pay close attention to the moral views of applicants for admission and for administrative and faculty appointments. It should be possible, for example, to design college aptitude questions and/or essays to reveal not only familiarity with basic categories of good and evil but also with the ability to think beyond these categories to their ultimate source. Topics for inclusion might include the validity of so-called politically correct ethical decisions based upon the assumption that no moral authority exists other than the human mind. Others might involve the applicant's views about the nature of the conscience and whether politically correct ethical decisions are also spiritually correct. Educational institutions of today need to consider whether the admission of students and the hiring of faculty and administrators bear any relation to the applicant's ability to see his own special interests and knowledge as part of the spiritual and evolutionary whole.

The desire and the capacity to reflect upon these basic issues often depend upon early acquaintance with them. Unfortunately public education in this country tends to avoid life's fundamental problems. In California's secondary schools, for example, the evolution of life is taught as a purely scientific phenomenon unrelated to man's evolutionary quest for moral and spiritual truths. To separate bioscience from the most significant aspect of human evolution is to discourage young minds from recognizing the essence of education. Those men and women who, as students, faculty members, or administrators, never-

theless persist in seeing the development of character and the virtuous life as the most essential part of the educational process would enhance the excellence of any university. Indeed, such people constitute our best hope for the future.

The modest beginnings of the University of California in Oakland in the 1850s harmonized with the moral and religious overtones of the times. Its Christian founders may also have been convinced that the ultimate purpose of education is a spiritual one. And in my judgment the University of California can never realize its potentials for excellence until it pushes education up to its highest prin-

ciples to recover its lost sense of the sacred.

1. R. Schoch, "California Questions and Answers: A Conversation with Chang-Lin Tien," *California Monthly* (September 1990). 2. "'Ethnic Diversity' at U. C. Berkeley," *San Francisco Chronicle* (June 16, 1990). 3. I. Muchnick, "The Chancellor's Big Test," *This World, San Francisco Chronicle* (May 5, 1991). 4. D. Littlejohn, "Political Correctness," *California Monthly* (February 1991). 5. W. S. Simmons, "American Cultures Breadth Requirement" (Center for the Teaching and Study of American Cultures, University of California, 1989). 6. *On the Scope and Nature of University Education* (London, 1965 [1915]). 7. *General Catalogue, University of California, Berkeley, 1991-1992*. 8. A. H. Armstrong, *Plotinus, Part III of The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, ed. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, Eng., 1967).

Harpichord

Triangles, squares, the eminent logical.
No postures here, no faceless dark nuance
to pluck the heartstring's thin and frosted metal.
Angels might thread this proud, this angular dance.

Each bright precise intention, surely poised
thwarting bewilderment, insists, intones
its pure gentilities of grief and joy—
piano, mezzo, forte . . .

These alone,
being firmly struck, dissolve on air again.

This keyboard's harmony but voices Now—
no dissonance, no pedaled-past sustained:

No hazard for the thin, the celibate vow.

—LOUISE DAUNER