

The Sinful University?

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In this paper, I will defend the thesis that if our contemporary University presumes an incomplete ontology of the human being, as its educational philosophy seems to suggest, then in the moral language of Josef Pieper and Jacques Maritain, it may be understood to be sinful as an institution.

There is a difference between doing something well and doing something good. And there is a difference between failing to do something well, and failing to do something good. Josef Pieper discusses this difference in *The Concept of Sin*. For Pieper, I fail to do something well when I fail “to get ‘just right’ whatever goal [I have] in mind.”¹ Pieper refers to this as an ‘artistic failure,’ where a person has some end in mind, but their means of attaining that end fails. For example, I aim to bake a batch of cookies, but I miss a necessary step. I forget to mix the dry ingredients before incorporating the wet ingredients and the batch is ruined. Failing to do something well involves means.

Failing to do something good involves ends. As Pieper writes, “one might reach the goal set for oneself...but at the same time, for that same reason, will have violated the universal goal of existence as a whole.”² In this sense of failure, one achieves the end they have in mind, but that end is morally noxious. It is an end one ought not to achieve, because it is an end that is wrong. Pieper’s own example demonstrates this kind of failure quite nicely: the nuclear bomb. The nuclear bomb achieves the end of mass murder well, but that end is morally noxious—it is sinful.

I would like to think of the University in this second sense of failure. While the University can be ineffective, or fail to function well, there is more at stake if the University, as an institution, is in conflict with nature. That is, it is one thing for the University to be ineffective in its means, but here I will pose the following question: Is our contemporary University sinful?

In order to pose this question, we must first have some understanding of what the right end of the university is. That is, where should the university aim, and how can the university set its aim so as to not come into conflict with nature?

In his short work regarding University education, *Education At The Crossroads*, Jacques Maritain makes the observation that because “the aim of education is the helping and guiding of man toward his [or her] own human achievement,”³ any given university, as an educational institution, always and already presupposes an

¹ Josef Pieper, *The Concept of Sin*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2001), 25.

² Pieper, *The Concept of Sin*, trans. Edward T. Oakes, 25.

³ Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1960), 4.

ontology of the human being. This means that any existing university presumes an idea of what the human being essentially is, and it guides its students towards this idea. As such, we can understand the aim of the university to be the idea of the human being that its education presumes.

Of course, the human ontology held by a given institution can be either right or wrong. If there is a true human nature, a university can both aim toward that true human nature, and guide its students toward becoming full human beings, or it can aim elsewhere and lead them astray. In order to know whether or not a university is aimed where it ought to be—that is, guiding its students towards the truly human—we must first understand what the human being essentially is.

In his article, “The Person and the Common Good,” Maritain explains that the human being is both an individual and a person. This is not meant in a dualistic sense—a human is not made up of two distinct and separate parts; rather, the human being is simultaneously, essentially, and indivisibly both an individual and a person. As Maritain writes: “our whole being is an individual by reason of that in us which derives from matter, and a person by reason of that in us which derives from spirit.”⁴ The human being is an individual insofar as he or she is “a fragment of species, a part of the universe, a unique point in the immense web of cosmic, ethnical, historical forces and influences—and bound by their laws.”⁵ For Maritain it is our material distinctiveness and intelligibility from one another—our qualities—that mark our individuality.

Personhood is more difficult to understand. Maritain observes that “love is not concerned with qualities.”⁶ It is not the beloved’s individuality that we love, rather “we love the deepest, most substantial and hidden, the most existing reality of the beloved being...a metaphysical center deeper than all the qualities and essences which we can find and enumerate.”⁷ It is the beloved’s person that we love. Unlike the material qualities that individuate a human being, that make him or her a part of the world, a part of the social, and a part of the political, Maritain writes that “the person as such is an independent whole and that which is noblest in all of nature.”⁸ Whereas a human being is an individual insofar as it is a part, it is a person insofar as it is a whole unto itself. Of course, for Maritain the human person is not unqualifiedly autonomous. On the contrary, the human person is

⁴ Jacques Maritain, “The Person and the Common Good,” *The Review of Politics* 8, no. 4 (October 1946): 434. Accessed November 15, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1404600>
Emphasis my own.

⁵ Maritain, “The Person and the Common Good,” 431.

⁶ Maritain, “The Person and the Common Good,” 431.

⁷ Maritain, “The Person and the Common Good,” 431-432.

⁸ Maritain, “The Person and the Common Good,” 441.

“nonetheless... at the lowest degree of personality.”⁹ The created and whole human person is an image of the uncreated whole that is God.

For Maritain, personhood is defined “in terms of independence, as a reality which, subsisting spiritually, constitutes a universe unto itself, a relatively independent whole within the great whole of the universe, facing the transcendent whole which is God.”¹⁰ We can explain the autonomy of the human person if we understand the difference between negative liberty and positive liberty. Negative liberty is the freedom from external restraint, a kind of complete and utter autonomy. This is not the liberty that characterizes the human person. Rather, the human person is characterized by a positive liberty: the freedom to ‘face the transcendent,’ and to understand itself as a created whole.

In *The Uses of Knowledge*, John Henry Newman describes a University that educates its students as though they are human persons, and not merely human individuals. For Newman, the University is “a place of teaching universal knowledge.”¹¹ It is the site where a knowledge, that is universal, is extended to the student, and not a place where knowledge is discovered and advanced. In order to understand what this means, we first must make sense of the way in which Newman understands knowledge to be universal.

Newman writes that “all branches of knowledge are connected together, because the subject-matter of knowledge is intimately united in itself, as being that acts and the work of the Creator.”¹² This means that knowledge is always knowledge of nature, and insofar nature is the work of a benevolent God, it is orderly and harmonious in and of itself. For Newman, knowledge is universal when it is knowledge of a thing that is universal: nature. It is not the role of the University to extend a particular knowledge; a knowledge that is divorced from the whole, but to deliver a universal knowledge: knowledge of nature. However, Newman does not mean that the University delivers a complete knowledge of nature to the student; rather, Newman puts forth the principle that “all Knowledge is a whole and the separate Sciences part of one.”¹³ In order to extend a universal knowledge, the University must teach the individual sciences that are parts of the whole of knowledge as parts of the whole. For example, the University should not teach Biology as a complete picture of the way that things are, but as a unique and complete worldview all on its own—including an account of Ethics, Physics, Psychology, etc.—because, for Newman, this would mean to “unsettle the

⁹ Maritain, “The Person and the Common Good,” 441.

¹⁰ Maritain, “The Person and the Common Good,” 432. Emphasis my own.

¹¹ John Henry Newman, *The Uses of Knowledge*, ed. Leo L. Ward, (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 2.

¹² Newman, *The Uses of Knowledge*, 8.

¹³ Newman, *The Uses of Knowledge*, 8.

boundary lines between science and science.”¹⁴ In doing this, the University would over-assert the role that the particular science plays in an understanding of the whole, which would mean to take away from the role some other science plays in that understanding.

When the University extends a universal knowledge, by teaching the particular sciences as contributing parts to the whole knowledge of nature, the University delivers what Newman believes is the goal of the University: a liberal education. Newman's idea of a liberal education consists in cultivating an intellectual healthiness that is an end unto itself. The intellect is not cultivated as a means for some external end, such as a practical art or a moral condition; rather, the end of this cultivation is this cultivation. This is how education is an end unto itself: the end of liberal education, which cultivates the intellect to understand the particular sciences as parts of a unified whole, is to understand the particular sciences as parts of a unified whole. Newman thinks that the University should cultivate the intellectual health of the student—not as a means for some external end, such as a practical art or a moral condition—but because the human intellect itself is worthy of cultivation: it is an end unto itself.

However, the autonomy of this intellectual health needs qualification. As was the case with Maritain's human person, Newman's University does not intend to make one free in a negative sense. Intellectual cultivation does not confer radical and absolute autonomy upon the student. Rather, cultivating the intellect gives the human being the freedom to place the particulars of his or her experience within the greater whole. Newman's theory of education assumes that the student is an end unto him or herself, and in doing so, it presumes that the human being is a person, and not merely or solely an individual.

Let us return to the topic at hand. For Maritain, an educational institution can misunderstand the human being. It can be ignorant of the human person, and guide its students exclusively towards human individuality. When the university misunderstands the human being as merely an individual, as a consequence it undervalues the human being. It places him or her underneath the social, the political, and the material—it sutures his or her education to the demands of the social, the political, and the material. When an educational institution presupposes this ontological misunderstanding, it treats the human being as only a part of the social, political, and material whole—as worthy of cultivation only for their sake, and not as an end unto itself.

This seems to happen in the contemporary world. I would like to suggest that MacEwan University, our university, functions on just such an ontological misunderstanding. Both the Board of Governors and the Academic Council of

¹⁴ Newman, *The Uses of Knowledge*, 9.

MacEwan University have approved the following 'educational philosophy' which is readily available on our institution's website:

We endeavor to enhance our students' capacity to live well-balanced, productive lives as citizens of our interconnected world. Our links with communities beyond the University—academic and professional, local and international—ensure the relevance of learning activities and enable students to move confidently into the workforce or on to further educational opportunities.¹⁵

While it is not self-evident that a public statement such as this educational philosophy can be understood as the perfect image of the sort of education delivered by our institution, I think that we can nonetheless interpret it to be at least symptomatic of the assumptions that are made by our institution. This is to say, I think that interpreting this educational philosophy can provide us with evidence of where our university is aimed that is not entirely out to lunch.

If this is a more or less accurate portrayal of the goals of our educational institution, then our institution explicitly conceives of the human being as merely an individual. This educational philosophy suggests that our education is delivered in order that we students may achieve the end of living a 'productive life' whether that means entering the workforce or going on to receive additional specialized education. It guides the student towards fulfilling the demands of the world we live in. It cultivates the student as though he or she is merely an individual part, and not a whole unto him or herself, worthy of cultivation for his or her own sake.

If Maritain and Newman are right, that as human beings we are worthy of cultivation for our own sake, then the education that thinks of the human being as only a producer, a citizen, and a worker has the wrong aim. Rather than guiding its students towards what is truly human, this sort of Education denies human personhood and leads its students astray, and in Pieper's moral terms, this kind of education is noxious because it is not aimed where it ought to be. It has the wrong end. The institution that delivers this sort of education is sinful. If the 'educational philosophy' provided by MacEwan University reveals its true aim—that is, if MacEwan University is actually aimed towards the cultivation of the student as only a worker, producer, and citizen, without any eye to his or her human personhood, then, in the moral terms laid out by Pieper and Maritain, our university has the wrong aim, and it assumes an incomplete ontology of the human being. It is sinful.

¹⁵ "University Philosophy and Direction," accessed November 15, 2013
<http://www.macewan.ca/wcm/ExecutiveandGovernance/BoardofGovernors/UniversityPhilosophyandDirection/index.htm#6>.

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