

310. Rescuing the University

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Academic freedom protections for both extra-mural utterance and criticizing one's university have weakened; professors and students have to watch what they say in and out of class for fear of formal or informal censure; department decisions are being countermanded by deans and vice-presidents academic; deans are taking for themselves what used to be department prerogatives; faculty unions only begrudgingly defend professors who oppose anti-academic equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives; race, ethnicity, sex and other non-academic factors bear heavily in hiring and other academic decisions; scholars who apply for positions as professors or academic administrators must swear fealty to the ideology and practice of EDI; research protocols and results must align with the wishes of certain groups; academic senates are legislating what professors may teach and how they may teach it; standards of academic accomplishment are falling; courses and curricula have become less challenging intellectually; identities and feelings are officially protected and celebrated; universities and faculty associations are keen to tell students and professors to avoid certain words; the professionalization of the professoriate continues unabated; the ranks of academic and non-academic administrators are swelling; Human Resources wants in on everything; civility has declined; relations among members of the university community are less than collegial.... The list of what ails contemporary universities is long.

The list is long because contemporary universities are turned toward social-justice ends and because university administrators and others are happy to use social-justice means to further those ends. The greater the commitment administrators, unions and Human Resources have to current ideas of social justice, the less academic values matter in their institutions and the greater the oversight and control exercised over students and professors.

How might we seek to turn our institutions toward their academic mission? I would say by animating in students, professors and administrators a commitment to academic values and a love of academic excellence. How might we do *that*? Let's first try to develop a conception of the academic mission.

I propose that we conceive a university to be a place at which people think hard about things. Moreover, students and professors at an academic university think hard about things for the sake of thinking hard about them. They love to engage in study for its own sake.

On this conception of a university, students and professors place thinking hard above all other purposes they might have. They don't guide themselves in their thinking about things by a concern to promote any other end, whether social, political, religious or vocational. This, of course, contrasts with a university conceived as an engine of economics or as a force for social justice. At such universities, study is in service to something outside it, and the institution will prefer relevant

non-academic values to academic ones should conflict arise between the two. Academic freedom, for instance, may be limited at such a university for the sake of inclusion.

The mission of an institution that gathers students and professors committed to study is to provide people with the resources useful to thinking hard about things and to maintain an atmosphere conducive to hard thought. Thinking hard about things involves thinking about them publicly, so that one's ideas can be both criticized and used by others. In thinking hard about something, we try to understand that thing. We try, that is, to come to know it, to know the truth about it. But the production of knowledge is not the mission of the university. Attempting to know is integral to the activity of thinking hard, but the point is found not only in the result but also in the process. Playing hockey involves trying to score goals and to win the game; nonetheless, win or lose, the object is to play the game and to play it well.

Now, if people committed to thinking hard about things have control of a university, they will institute no policies or programs that interfere with their commitment. They will value academic freedom, wide freedom of expression on campus, rigour in argument and research, and high academic standards, and so they will protect and promote these things in the structures and policies they create. They will hire as professors scholars doing academically sound and interesting work. They will appoint as officers in their institutions scholars committed to the academic mission and competent to look after it. They will not hire or appoint by race, ethnicity, sex or any other characteristic irrelevant to the academic mission, for they do not wish to risk compromising that mission.

The problem we face in attempting to reform our universities is that very few people, both outside and within contemporary universities, have a strong love of thinking hard about things, or any love of it at all. What our administrators and many of our colleagues seek are goals outside the academic engagement. For them, thinking is merely a tool to use. To change the culture of our universities, to make them academic universities, we need to instil in people the love of study, the love of engaging with the world academically.

A serious difficulty here is that one cannot, except accidentally, bring another to love something through argument. As soon as one describes the love of study as good or important, one relates it to something outside itself. Good for what? Important to what? The argument in favour of study will then be an argument that study is effective in promoting something other than study. Study is good for its economic effects, or for figuring out what to do with one's life, or for becoming educated, or for solving social or technical problems.

But in light of that point, it might appear that either one loves study for its own sake or one doesn't, and that's it; or that one loves study to the degree one does and no more, so that should what is good for study conflict with what one loves more (social justice, for instance), what is good for study must lose. If this is true, if some people love study for its own sake simply as a matter of temperament and other people don't, then there's not really much that anyone can do to make universities hospitable to the academic mission.

My suggestion is that we who love study for its own sake simply continue to engage in study and, in doing so, model the engagement for our students and our colleagues. While it is true that one

either loves something (to some degree) or doesn't, it is also true that loves are acquired. That someone does not currently love study for its own sake does not mean that he cannot love it. We are unable to persuade him to love it, for, as we've seen, at best all we can argue is that engaging in study is useful to attaining something else he wants. But by inviting him to engage in study along with us, to follow our lead, he might well experience study as we do and come to appreciate the engagement in the way that we do. Providing opportunities to engage in an activity and showing by example how to engage in it is what we do when we hope to encourage in people a love of music or sport or gardening or tinkering with electronic devices.

Study consists in activities, various activities all of which involve thinking hard. We participate in discussions, write papers, question students, prepare examinations, conduct experiments, read papers others have written, grade students' papers and contemplate theories and interpretations, among much else. We can engage in these activities well or poorly. We engage in them well when we apply our skills deftly and thereby manage to meet the standards of excellence inherent in the activity. Participating in an academic discussion, a discussion aiming to resolve an intellectual problem, in a way that helps to make the discussion a good one requires listening carefully to others, offering insights on the matter at hand, suggesting criticisms and explaining one's ideas concisely but in a way that others understand them. Does one anticipate objections to one's position and answer them or does one wait until someone raises the objection? It's a matter of judgement, and what one decides might serves the discussion well or poorly. In meeting the standards of excellence internal to the activity of participating in an academic discussion, one brings into being such goods as narrative tension and release, a shock of insight, a feeling of accomplishment, a deeper or more comprehensive understanding (on one's own part or on the part of others) and, perhaps, a resolution of the problem at hand.

Although an academic discussion will almost inevitably contain arguments, it itself is not an argument but a conversation. And although we seek through the conversation to establish some understanding or interpretation, we do not judge the excellence of the conversation by its results (it might have none; we might draw no conclusion) or by any effects it produces.

What makes academic engagement difficult and unpleasant or upsetting for many is its disputatiousness. In the absence of criticism, vigorous criticism, no activity is an academic activity. An academic university must be marked by a culture of disputation. Yet criticism and disputation trouble and disturb people. When we criticize and reject a person's ideas and beliefs, we attack something important to that person, a part of his identity. That can feel like attacking the person himself. We don't enjoy being criticized or seeing things that matter to us disparaged. And because we feel it is unkind, we don't enjoy criticizing others and might refrain from doing so.

Indeed, it is disputation and criticism that enemies of academic universities seek above all to control and limit, precisely because disputation and criticism are unpleasant and occasionally emotionally wounding. Policies that enjoin members of an academic community to respect each other aim to protect students, professors and both academic and non-academic administrators from criticism and the harm it can cause. Our academic administrators seek through safe-and-respectful-campus policies to create a culture of celebration, the celebration of identities and feelings, a culture to replace the academic culture of disputation.

The tradition of criticism and disputation that runs, however feebly sometimes, through the history of universities is what makes universities strange and puzzling institutions. That humans, clannish creatures who love affirmation and reassurance, would create institutions marked by a culture of disputation almost beggars belief. Criticism and disputation, like torture and murder, are for humans both natural and repellant. That we tend to dislike criticism and disputation explains why academic universities are both rare and difficult to create or sustain.

A first task, then, in seeking to instil in newcomers (and colleagues and administrators, as well, sadly), is, first, a tolerance of disputation and criticism and, then, a love of it as central to the academic engagement. In socializing our students into the academic endeavour, we have to show by example a willingness to give criticism and to take it. Now, one might suppose that we should encourage our students not to take criticism personally. But that might not be realistic. It is hard not to take to heart attacks on one's cherished beliefs. One might also suppose that the task is to come to be able to give and receive criticism civilly or respectfully. But that would be to offer civility or respect as values from outside the academic engagement, values that constrain it. While participants in an academic dispute might appear civil, it is not civility at which they aim; they aim, rather, to attain a sound understanding of the matter at hand.

The ability and willingness to hold aspects of one's identity at arm's length so that one, and others, can examine them, and examine them critically, is centrally part of what it is to be an academic. There is no way to ease our students into this ability. Students will acquire the attitudes and preferences of academics piecemeal and not all at once, much as we as children came to acquire language. Accepting to give and receive criticism will come late in a student's socialization into the academic way of life, but it marks a turning point, a completion of the first part of the project. Once a student acquires the identity of an academic, the student will tolerate criticism, even should he or she not like it, as necessary to living as an academic. Receiving criticism might remain as painful as taking a bodycheck in hockey, but academics accept it as part of the academic engagement, an engagement they love.

To summarize: 1) When professors and administrators at a university take their institution to serve a goal such as social justice, prosperity or nation building, academic freedom and other academic values suffer. 2) To be an academic university, the professors must value thinking hard for its own sake, and university administrators must be concerned to create an institution that supports hard thought and puts nothing in its way. 3) The primary task for those of us who wish to turn our institutions into academic universities is to bring our students and colleagues to love study, the activities marked by hard thought, for its own sake. 4) Central to study is criticism and disputation. 5) Few people happy by temperament to be criticized or to engage in contentiousness or disputation. 6) Bringing our colleagues and students to love study requires acclimatizing them to the culture of disputation. 7) It is only through inviting our students to engage in academic endeavours along with us that they can come to love study. 8) Even those temperamentally disinclined to engage in critical discussion will come to appreciate a culture of disputation if they develop a love of study.

My claim is not that by living as academics and inviting others to experience academic engagement along with us in all its disputatious splendor, we professors will rescue the contemporary university. My claim is only that we cannot rescue it any other way.

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