

Introduction to University: Lecture One

Liberal Study and the University

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For many students and professors, university is a means to an end. That end might be having the credentials or the skills and knowledge needed for a job or career, it might be earning a living, it might be being educated. It's possible, though, to attend university simply for the sake of engaging in study with others. It is possible simply to enjoy thinking hard about things in community with others who are thinking hard about things. In this lecture, I'll try to describe just what the academic engagement is.

Of course, that one engages in some activity for the sake of the activity itself doesn't imply that one doesn't also use that activity as a means to some other end. One might enjoy skiing but go skiing not only to enjoy skiing but also for exercise or recreation. One might eat not only because the meat is savory and the appetite keen, but also for nutrition and energy or to spend time with one's friends. To engage with the world as a student or a professor can be an end in itself while also being a stepping stone to something else.

Unfortunately, few students approach study as something to enjoy for its own sake; few seem even to understand that study can be an end in itself. For these students, university is about paying dues. It's true that study for its own sake will never be to everyone's liking. But I'm sure more students would take to it if only they had the right university environment, including sound role models, and were invited to try it.

Is it possible to go to university for the academic experience of going to university? Is it possible to put that experience at the centre of one's concerns? Maybe it's possible to ride the city bus just for the experience of riding the city bus, but few people do and most of us laugh at the idea. We want our bus ride to be pleasant, certainly, and if it is we're happy and none the worse for wear when we get off at our stop. Still, we would have done without the bus ride if it were possible just to be where we wanted to go. Going to university, then, following this train of thought, should be pleasant and fun, both in the classroom and in one's social life; but, even so, the academic experience of university, if not the social one, is to be got on with, not savoured. The academic experience is the dues one must pay for a chance at career success or whatever.

I think that one *can* value, just for its own sake, the academic experience a university might afford. Indeed, I think that the best way universities can serve many of their various other functions is to put the academic experience right at their very centres. But even if I am wrong on that second point, an academic university is a wonderful thing for those who prize thinking hard about things in community with others, and prizing thinking hard about things is not hard to do.

Universities have from the beginning been home to people who love, just for its own sake, thinking hard about difficult matters. Sometimes universities even promote themselves as such places, as institutions in which scholars and students are free to love wrestling with the questions. But the tradition of study for its own sake has always been a minority tradition, even at the best universities, those universities whose ethos is generated and sustained by intellectual inquiry for its own sake.

Think of an on-going conversation at a quiet pub (where people are present more for the conversation than for the food or drink). A speaker will offer an idea and defend that idea with an argument. Someone will criticize the idea or the argument, and someone else will add another line of defence. Then someone will respond to the criticism and add another argument. The topic of discussion will change slightly or even entirely as the conversation continues. Some people will leave to attend to other matters, new people will join, a few previous participants will rejoin. All of us in the conversation are attempting to find and articulate the truth about the topic, but it's the quality of the attempt that we admire and in which we take joy. An intense and open conversation at a quiet pub: that's what a university that values the academic mission for its own sake should feel like.

What I'm talking about is sometimes understood under the phrase "liberal education." But because the term "education" suggests a process with an outcome, where the outcome is the reason for undergoing the process, I will introduce a new term, "study," in place of "education." I want to describe an institution we can call a university of liberal study.

Those who engage in liberal study value their own intellectual and moral autonomy. That is, they are able to think for themselves, at least to an appreciable degree, and they want to think for themselves; as well, they are able to find their own values and to set their own goals, and they want to find their own values and to set their own goals. They want to believe what they do on the basis of evidence and argument, and on the basis of evidence and argument alone. They want to be aware of what matters to them and they want their values to align well with each other and to form a consistent set. Their values align well when, for instance, if they want to drink another beer, they want to want to drink another beer. Their values are misaligned when some things that they want or desire are in tension with other things they want or desire.

One who lacks intellectual autonomy will often order her beliefs according to her hopes and fears. She's inclined to believe that which will gain her approval, disinclined to believe what might get her shamed or shunned. The desire to fit in and to be liked overrides the desire to get it right; or, rather, whether believing it will promote her interests becomes her standard of truth.

Those who engage in liberal study within a university community value their own intellectual and moral autonomy, but they also value the intellectual and moral autonomy of their fellow academics, whether professors or students. They will criticize the ideas and arguments of members of their community, but they won't try to apply any pressure on their fellows to get them to reform their views or values other than the pressures of evidence and argument.

Truth or knowledge is the goal of academic endeavour, but it is the goal of the endeavour in just the way that winning the game is the goal of hockey. Trying to outscore the other team gives a hockey game its structure and direction, but it is in the playing itself that the joy of the game resides. Players seek to meet standards of excellence in passing, shooting, playmaking and checking; in meeting the standards of excellence of their sport, they bring about a well played hockey game. It is participating in a well played game that they enjoy, and in which they can take pride, even when their side goes down to defeat.

The same is true of thinking hard about difficult things. Professors, scholars, researchers, intellectuals and students engage in reading and thinking, in designing and conducting experiments and surveys, in lectures and discussions, in writing papers and giving presentations. They seek to meet the standards of excellence in the various activities that make up academic life. In posing a probing question, creating a rich interpretation or developing a rigorous argument, they attain the physical and intellectual goods of academic endeavour.

Playing hockey is a practice, a set of interrelated activities, and so, too, is engaging in liberal study. Practices need institutions if they are to survive and thrive. Hockey has leagues and liberal study has universities. Leagues and universities are to protect and promote the practices they house. Their task is to create spaces dedicated to their practices and to supply participants with the resources they need if they are to seek to meet the standards of excellence internal to the practice.

While hockey and liberal study take their point from the goods internal to the practices themselves, goods such as a well played game and a well-conceived and well-run seminar, institutions take their point from making the pursuit of the internal goods possible. But institutions are liable to corruption. That is because institutions must trade in goods that are external to the practices they house. Chief among these goods are money, power and status. An institution committed to the practice it houses uses these external goods in ways that serve the practice. A corrupt institution, on the other hand, uses the practice to further ends that have little to do with that practice. It might use the practice to collect more money, power and status so that it might distribute them among those in the institution's bureaucracy. Or it might use the practice to further the goals of, say, social justice.

Generating and criticizing understandings of things is a mission spread wide over the university. Chemists, historians and philosophers, for instance, all engage in it. But it is only one form the academic mission takes. Another form is generating and criticizing interpretations of things. In discussing a poem or novel, academics are not seeking the truth about anything. Instead, they compare and contrast readings of the poem or novel, trying thereby to find those readings by which the work is most powerful—or trying thereby to explain why the poem or novel is flat or derivative. A third form the academic mission takes is articulating evaluations of things, primarily ethical and aesthetic evaluations.

The task of the institution of a university, then, at least when that institution values liberal study, is to provide members of the academic community with opportunities to reflect on matters of intellectual interest or concern to those members. Their task is to support the core academic experience of following the arguments where they lead and weighing conflicting ideas, interpretations and arguments against each other.

Those who engage in the activities of liberal study, who engage in those activities for the sake of the engagement, who love study for its own sake, are people who wish to live a certain kind of life. But living this life is not something one can want prior to engaging in liberal study, for prior to the engagement, one can have little or no idea what that life is like. A student must first simply devote himself to study, pretty much on a gamble, just to find out whether he likes it, or likes it well enough to continue with it.

We professors might hope to instil in our students a taste for study or to awaken their passion for it, but that is not our task. Indeed, if we set out to change our students, to create in them commitment to the life of the mind, we will likely not succeed. For one, we will be using means other than argument, evidence and example to affect the thoughts and emotions of our students, and that would be to manipulate them. Since we value people's intellectual and moral autonomy, we may not, consistently with our principles, seek to manipulate others into valuing intellectual and moral autonomy, not even for their own good. We must instead simply engage in the activities of liberal study: thinking hard about things and trying to understand, interpret or appraise those things. Our students have our example and their ability to choose to adopt that example. Maybe they will follow us.

Now, of course, students need to make good decisions about where, when, and what to study; they should make their decisions not only on the basis of their tastes and talents but also in light of an accurate understanding of the financial and other costs of being committed to study, and of the external rewards of gaining skills, knowledge and credentials. But once a student has decided to pursue liberal study, he or she should pursue it in the spirit of liberal study. A student is wise to enrol in the programmes and to take the courses that are best to take in that pursuit, and to read, write, and say what serves his education best. But students committed to liberal study will care little for grades, though they will certainly take comments on their work and criticisms of it seriously. They do well to engage with others who pursue study for its own sake. The more of us (students and professors) who work under an attitude of commitment to liberal study, the more fun we will have and, though this isn't the point, the better educated we will become.

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