



Weber, Newman, and the Fate of Philosophy (and Theology) in a Disenchanted Age

Jennifer A. Frey

This is an unpublished conference paper for the 10th Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 8th – Saturday 10th September 2022. These papers are works in progress and should not be cited without author's prior permission.

Introduction

The current state of philosophy in higher education is less than ideal. Our majors are dwindling, our departments are being cut back and downsized, and our future feels uncertain. Part of the problem is the way that philosophy is perceived. Is philosophy a good investment? Is philosophy important? Is philosophy even respectable as a discipline? What would it mean for philosophy to be respectable, what would we have to say for ourselves to make it so? That we make progress in the great task of advancing knowledge? Does philosophy really make progress? Would it make sense for a young person to aspire to be a philosopher? What would they hope to get out of such a vocation?

I am somewhat skeptical that philosophy can conform itself very easily to the prevailing standards of excellence within the contemporary academy without thereby deforming itself as philosophy, understood in the classical sense as the pursuit of wisdom. But if my skepticism is well founded, it does not necessarily follow that we have to pack up our bags and go home or continue to drift into irrelevance. Rather (and this is what I will in fact suggest) what follows is that the prevailing self-understanding of the academy what it prizes as scholarship or genuine rational knowledge, as well as how it understands its constitutive purpose or aim—is what can and must be called into question if philosophy can thrive within it.

I will approach this topic—the place of philosophy in the university—first by outlining Max Weber’s influential account of scholarship (*Wissenschaft*) as a case study in how the contemporary academy understands itself as in the business of “knowledge production” for the sake of general, utilitarian ends. Although it is rarely explicitly articulated or endorsed, my strong impression is that Weber’s concept of scholarship (or a close cousin to it) prevails in the

contemporary research academy. However, I think it is not difficult to see that this is a terrible model for philosophy and theology, and perhaps for humanities disciplines on the whole. After outlining Weber's account of scholarship, with its attendant notion of progress, I will then discuss Newman's conception of "universal knowledge" as an alternative for the university to embrace as its gold standard of knowledge, as this model of knowledge better fits the idea of liberal learning generally. I will then connect this with an account of liberal education that is higher in a meaningful sense—it is the education that cultivates the mind so that it develops the habits that allow a person attain a modicum of interior freedom—and then show why philosophy will always need to be at the heart of such an education.

Part One: Weber and Scholarship

In 1917, Max Weber was invited by a group of university students in Munich to launch a lecture series on "Intellectual work as a vocation." The students were members of the Free Student Alliance, a group that championed the idea of intellectual work and the pursuit of knowledge *for its own sake*, *bildung* or moral education, and academic freedom during a time when these ideals were under pressure from disciplinary specialization, state intervention, market pressures, and a world war. Addressing about one hundred students in a lecture hall, Weber delivered an address that was surely unwelcome given their sensibilities and commitments. Rather than give a defense of the lofty ideals that motivated Humboldt to start his university in Berlin a century prior, Weber gave an account of scholarship as mere expertise, undertaken in a spirit of infinite progress that is not aimed at anything ultimately meaningful or fulfilling, and we should not pretend otherwise.

Weber articulates his remarks on scholarship (*Wissenschaft*) within his more general diagnosis of modernity as a period of disenchantment. He writes:

Increasing rationalization and intellectualization does *not*, in other words, mean a greater knowledge of the conditions we live under. Rather, it means something else: the knowledge, or belief, that we *could* find out if we *wanted* to; that in principle there are no mysterious incalculable forces intervening in our lives, but instead all things, in theory, can be *mastered through calculation*. It means the disenchantment of the world. Unlike the savage, for whom such mysterious forces existed, we no longer need to adopt magical means to control or pray to the spirits—we make use, instead, of technology and calculation. This, above all, is what intellectualization means (18).

It is constitutive of his concept of *disenchantment* (*Entzauberung*) that we exert a kind of Baconian mastery or rational control over nature, and thereby, our own lives. Notice, though, that *enchantment* for Weber is connected to “magic”—indeed, a literal translation might be “de-magic-ification”. Whatever is “magical” on this view, it seems, is whatever cannot be shoehorned into the ontologies, epistemologies, and calculative rationalities of the natural sciences. The university is an institution that inevitably reflects this basic condition of modernity.

It is within this larger framework that Weber presents—as descriptive fact—an account of scholarship as specialized expertise. He argues that:

In the present era, what primarily shapes the psychology of anyone who pursues an academic calling is the fact that scholarship, in both science and the humanities, has entered an apparently permanent phase of specialization unlike any that has gone before. This specialization is not only the institutional reality—it shapes the scholar’s own experience.

It follows from this, according to Weber, that

We can feel sure we have achieved something of real scholarly value only if we have specialized to the utmost degree; whenever we do work that infringes on neighboring scholarship...we must resign ourselves to knowing that at best we have supplied useful

questions to the expert, questions which may not have occurred to him so easily from his own specialized perspective, but that our answers must necessarily have remained woefully incomplete.

Weber argues that the scholar is a professional expert who labors in the service of self-understanding and to increase our repository of objective facts. He is emphatic that it is not “a gift of grace with seers and prophets dispensing holy objects and revelations, nor a part of sages’ and philosopher’s meditations on the meaning of life.” In fact, real scholarship leaves unasked questions of meaning and value. Weber argues that:

Every natural science answers the question, “What should we do if we want to use the techniques at our disposal to control life?” while leaving unanswered, even unasked, simply taken for granted, whether we *should* control life through technology, whether we want to, and whether its ultimately meaningful to do so.

Weber further yokes the notion of scholarly work to a technical notion of progress that is incremental and without end. The scholar works towards a future in which his own work is necessarily undermined by the progress of others. The sort of knowledge that scholarship produces is destined to be irrelevant to future scholars, who will labor to surpass it with their own. Weber writes:

In the realm of scholarship, we all know that everything we’ve done and are doing will be obsolete in ten or twenty or fifty years. That is the destiny of such work—what’s more, that is the point of such work. In a very specific sense, scholarship, unlike any other cultural endeavor, is dedicated to its own obsolescence. Every scholarly work that accomplishes its goal produces new questions; it wants to be “surpassed” and left behind.

Here Weber articulates an idea of progress in knowledge as one in which future knowledge does not build on the foundation of the past, but makes the past irrelevant. Weber seems to be taken by the conviction (unargued for) that scholarly knowledge will always march forward

in progress, only looking behind itself insofar as this is useful to forging straight ahead.

Tradition, on this view, carries with it no special authority or value, nor could any idea of a perennial philosophy really get off the ground on this account. It is deeply unclear why anyone would study Aristotle's ethics or metaphysics, for example, beyond expertise in historical thought, which I suppose may prove useful in a variety of ways.

It is also essential to this definition of progress that it has no ultimate horizon. Weber does not believe in transcendent norms like truth, goodness, or beauty, and he certainly has no normative conception of wisdom governing the scholar's work. So what, then, is the meaning or value of scholarly work? Weber's answer has three parts.

First, scholarship gives us more techniques for calculating and thus controlling life, including human behavior. Second, scholarship gives us methods of thinking: the tools of the trade and the training needed to use them. Third, scholarship gives clarity about the means to ends we have adopted. What scholarship emphatically does not and should not do, according to Weber, is tell us which ends we should pursue. To render a judgment of value would be demagoguery, an abuse of power. Scholarship can in principle have nothing to say about ultimate ends. This is the inevitable result of the forces of disenchantment, which create a situation in which "the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life."

Now one question that presents itself here is what sort of disciplines can count as

Wissenschaft? Weber is clear that theology is out—it violates the terms of modernity as he has outlined them, and therefore can be no part of a modern university. He argues:

All theology is an intellectual rationalization of religion's sacred domain. No field of scholarship is absolutely without presuppositions and it cannot prove its value to anyone who rejects the assumptions it does contain, but that said, every theology adds

a few extra assumptions in order to do its work and justify its existence...Every theology presupposes that the world must have a meaning and asks how to interpret this meaning so that it is graspable by the mind.

Weber seems to suggest that he would be completely fine with the academic study of religion, so long as it did not go further than describing the meaning that various world religions have *purported* to find. But theology will go further than this sort of scholarship. Weber continues:

[theologians] tend to proceed from the additional assumption that certain particular revelations must be believed, as facts, and as sacred facts too—as the only beliefs that make it possible to lead a meaningful life. They presuppose, in addition, that various attitudes and states of being are sacred or, in other words, constitute or are key elements in leading a religiously meaningful life. They then ask how these premises, accepted as given, should be meaningfully interpreted within a general worldview.

But these premises about sacred facts (what someone like Aquinas would call the articles of faith, which are the first principles of *sacra doctrina*) are plainly outside the realm of rational knowledge as Weber understands it. Weber accuses religious believers of sacrificing their intellects for the sake of their religious beliefs and he further sets up an opposition between systematic knowledge (*Wissenschaft*) and religious salvation—for Weber, one will always come at the expense of the other. Weber leaves us a model of scholarship and university teaching and learning in which judgments of ultimate value not only have no place, but make no sense. However, lying behind this account of scholarship is a judgment about what counts as rational knowledge that seems to leave not just theological knowledge but philosophical knowledge in a marginalized position (at least, it will certainly leave metaphysics and moral philosophy in a very tough position, something that the logical positivists and other forms of extreme empiricism would make plain just a few years later).

But Weber never argues for his preferred ontology or epistemology—he simply asserts them. But, of course, empiricism is a philosophical theory of knowledge and remains disputed, just as materialism is a disputed metaphysics. So just as Weber wonders how anyone can prattle on about happiness after Nietzsche, we might wonder how anyone can prattle on about empiricism after Wittgenstein. But perhaps, in a way, this response is neither here nor there.

Why do I say this?

I think, to a certain extent, we are all Weberians scholars now, but not because we have chosen to live and work under this self-conception. Rather, it seems to me that our universities force us into this mold, whether we like it or not. Universities now understand themselves in the knowledge production business, where knowledge production is understood in terms of discrete, measurable, isolated outputs. In order to get tenure or promotion within our universities, one must focus on publishing in academic venues, which means that one must be a hyper-specialist in some area of identifiable scholarship. The tenure and promotion process is all but designed to ensure that we remain in our disciplinary silos. Most of us have no idea what is going on in other departments, because we have no incentive to know and nothing but bureaucratic obstacles standing in the way of finding out. Even undergraduate education is now merely a prologue to specialization and professionalization, since its measure of success is all too often its effectiveness in preparing students for admission to graduate or professional schools.

This is an especially poor model for the discipline of philosophy, which, in the contemporary university, is just one discipline alongside others, with no special job or function. Unfortunately for the philosopher, we are not properly scientific experts and we work on topics

that most people have never heard of and that seem frankly useless, such as metaphysics or epistemology. The value of philosophical reflection on being or knowledge is increasingly opaque to the denizens of the university—perhaps it is opaque even to ourselves. After all, when pressed to defend our existence in university life, philosophers often resort to uninspired and unconvincing boilerplate about the importance of “critical thinking” or, increasingly, the outline of a contemporary political or social agenda that philosophical reflection might usefully advance. Long gone are the days when philosophers are willing to speak of themselves as striving for something like *wisdom*. We philosophers produce our research outputs like everyone else and hope that by the gratuitous grace of those with institutional power over us, we can be allowed to carry on with our intellectual labors, despite the fact that our majors have dwindled to almost nothing.

However, so long as the Weberian ideal of scholarship prevails in our universities, philosophy will remain threatened and marginalized in contemporary higher education. I think the same is true of the Humanities more generally. We do well to remember that Weber’s narrow vision of scholarship, which leads him to deny theology a place in our universities, equally works against philosophy and perhaps the study of literature and the classics too. If what the university gives is credentialized expertise, then the Humanities disciplines will always appear as quirky, boutique options at best.

Many humanists are quite married to the Weberian ideal, however. For example, in a recent hit piece in the *New Yorker* against Roosevelt Montas, a Dominican born lecturer in the Humanities at Columbia University whose book, *Rescuing Socrates*, is a robust defense of the

traditional account of liberal learning rooted in the study of the classical texts of western civilization, Menand asked the following:

Why should an English professor who got his degree with a dissertation on the American Transcendentalists (as Montás did), and who doesn't read Italian or know anything about medieval Christianity, teach Dante, when you have a whole department of Italian-literature scholars on your faculty? What qualifies a man like Arnold Weinstein, who has spent his entire adult life in the literature departments of Ivy League universities, to guide eighteen-year-olds in ruminations on the state of their souls and the nature of the good life?

He continues:

Montás is using the term "liberal education" mistakenly. Virtually every course at an élite school like Columbia, from poetry to physics, is part of a liberal education. "Liberal" just means free and disinterested. It means that inquiry is pursued without fear or favor, regardless of the outcome and whatever the field of study. Universities exist to protect that freedom.

Menand sees no value in reading or teaching Dante outside the framework of Wissenschaft—of scholarship in Weber's narrow and technical sense. He scoffs at the idea that reading Dante might develop a student on a deeper, more fundamental level. The echoes of Weber are clear. The professor is a scholar, not a prophet, a priest, or a politician. He should stay in his lane and teach students who want to read Dante to become a Dante expert. All of this talk of reading as a cultivation of soul is embarrassing and reeks of the charlatan. Meanwhile I would like to note that the percentage of incoming freshman at Harvard who want to pursue study of a Humanities major, where Menand has an endowed chair, is less than 8%. The future of Humanities scholarship is bleak, even at Harvard.

Part Two: Newman, the University, and Universal Knowledge

We will only feel the force of Weber's argument if we accept his account of disenchantment as a powerful sociological, cultural, and historical process that inevitably shapes university life, as it does all of modern life. While I think we can see the forces of disenchantment all around us, it operates rather imperfectly and in competition with other forces that temper it; furthermore, we are not merely passive subjects of sociological, cultural, and economic forces, we are agents who have the ability to think and act as individuals and as a political collective, and so, insofar as we can see the negative effects and implications of disenchantment, we can fight back in various ways against it, including of course in our universities.

However, in order to be agents of change in our universities, we must articulate and advocate for a credible alternative to the dominant Weberian ideal. I think we find the resources for constructing an alternative model in John Henry Newman's *The Idea of a University*. I am not going to argue that we can realize Newman's ideal university wholesale—there is no chance of this, and it would have its obvious downsides. Rather, I want to think about how the secular academy might move towards something closer to Newman's ideal. So I will proceed as follows. First, I will discuss Newman's conception of liberal learning and the account of universal knowledge that lies at its heart. Then I will end with an example of how we might work incrementally towards that ideal in our present scholarly vocations.

Newman's *Idea of a University* was written in 1852, twelve years before Weber was even born. It is a series of inaugural lectures for a Catholic University that Newman himself was newly in charge of—an endeavor that ultimately failed. In these lectures, Newman advocates for the idea of a university that is focused primarily on teaching the liberal arts, with the

understanding that liberal arts are those arts undertaken for their own sake, and that bring about the habits of mind that prepare young students to be free (in the sense of interior freedom—the freedom to know what is true, good, and beautiful). For Newman, a University is concerned first and foremost not with the *advancement* of knowledge, but its diffusion and *extension*.

One thing to note right, in order to stave off confusion, is that Newman's definition of a university has nothing essentially to do with Christianity or the Church. The university is defined simply as an institution dedicated to seeking and *teaching universal knowledge*. Much of the second lecture is devoted to the explication of this sort of knowledge.

Newman is most concerned that the university be a place where the whole of liberal knowledge is represented. It is not simply that no part of this knowledge can be left out, but that this knowledge must form a whole or be comprehended as a unity. The unity of knowledge functions as something of a regulative ideal for Newman (much as it did for Humboldt in his original vision of the modern research university in Berlin).

Like Weber, Newman speaks of knowledge in terms of facts, but unlike Weber, he thinks that we can know facts beyond what strictly empirical methods might deliver. He thinks we can have knowledge through intuition, through testimony, through abstract reasoning, etc. By whatever licit means we come by such knowledge, it will fit into a larger system or unified account of what can be known—of reality. So Newman argues that:

Truth is the object of knowledge of whatever kind; and when we inquire what is meant by Truth, I suppose it is right to answer that Truth means facts and their relations, which stand towards each other pretty much as subjects and predicates in logic. All that exists, as contemplated by the human mind, forms *one large system or complex fact*, and this

of course resolves itself into an indefinite number of particular facts, which, as being portions of a whole, have countless relations of every kind, one towards another.

Truth is not simply grasping of facts (making true assertions) but understanding facts in relation to one another as a totality, as part of a comprehensive system. Here Newman draws on the concept of *aletheia* in Aristotle, a deeper truth that goes beyond mere assertoric truth. This deep sense truth carries with it something like a concept of progress. Newman writes:

The human mind cannot take in this whole vast fact at a single glance, or gain possession of it at once. Like a short-sighted reader, its eye pores closely, and travels slowly, over the awful volume which lies open for its inspection. Or again, as we deal with some huge structure of many parts and side, the mind goes round about it, noting down, first one thing, then another, as it best may, and viewing it under different aspects, by way of *making progress towards mastering the whole*. So by degrees and circuitous advances does it rise aloft and subject to itself a knowledge of that universe into which it has been born.

Newman's idea of progress, by contrast with Weber's, is the idea of making progress in seeing how the parts of truth relate to the greater whole of truth. Behind this idea of truth is a conception of the universe—the totality of being or reality—as intrinsically intelligible or knowable. There can be no universal knowledge or deep sense truth without this concept of a universe. And there can be no university without a universe and universal knowledge.

Newman contends:

All knowledge forms one whole, because its subject matter is one; for the universe in its length and breadth is so intimately knit together that we cannot separate off portion from portion and operation from operation, except by mental abstraction.

If we accept this model of universal knowledge as an ideal towards which the university ought to strive in all of its intellectual endeavors, then we can see how all of the disciplines taught within the university ought, at least in principle, to bear upon one another. Newman argues

that the various sciences arrange and classify facts, reduce separate phenomena under common principles, and trace effects to their causes. Inasmuch as sciences are forms of knowledge, they ought to be able to communicate with other sciences their results, in order to contribute to universal knowledge. It follows from this that each science then must understand itself to be incomplete without the other sciences in the university, and each must recognize the respects in which the other sciences are contributing to the whole of universal knowledge. For Newman, the ideal university is a place of sharing knowledge, guided by the regulative ideal of the unity of knowledge. All departments within Newman's ideal university must understand themselves as making a necessary but incomplete contribution to the whole of knowledge. Another way to say this is that each professor understands himself not merely as seeking the truth from within his disciplinary methodology and perspective, but as doing that for the sake of something higher: universal knowledge or wisdom.

For this reason philosophy, the discipline which is especially concerned with the pursuit of wisdom, has a privileged position in Newman's ideal university. He argues that:

The comprehension of the bearings of one science upon another, and the use of each to each, and the location and limitations and adjustment and due appreciation of them all, one with another, this belongs to a *sort of science distinct from them all*, and in some sense *a science of sciences*, which is my own conception of what is meant by *philosophy*, in the true sense of the word, and of a philosophical habit of mind.

Ultimately, what Newman wants is for philosophical or universal knowledge to be communicated in every university discipline. He argues that we move towards philosophical knowledge of what we study only insofar as we can begin to see how the different disciplinary truths are related to one another and how the truths they reveal form a unified body of

knowledge that is consistent with itself. It follows from this, according to Newman, that all university professors and students will need training in philosophy.

Finally, I want to address Newman's account of what universal knowledge is for. It is for truth and wisdom, of course, but how does Newman try to sell this to potential benefactors? In addition to reminding them that we ought to pursue knowledge for its own sake (because it is the goal of the mind and therefore the fulfilment of human nature), Newman argues that the pursuit of universal knowledge helps to form certain habits of mind that are essential to living well no matter what one does after graduation, and this is the greatest advantage of an institution that is truly devoted to liberal, or universal learning. For in such a place, students learn to

respect, consult, and aid on another. Students begin to apprehend the great outlines of knowledge, the principles on which it rests, the scale of its parts, its lights and shades, its great points and its little, as he otherwise cannot apprehend them. Hence it is that his education is called "liberal." For a habit of mind is formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are: freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom, which I have ventured to call philosophical habit. This is the special fruit of the education furnished at a University.

Conclusion

I want to conclude by dwelling just a bit more on the idea of a liberal education that animates Newman's account of a university. Newman is sticking to the account of the liberal arts articulated in Aristotle's Politics, that these are the disciplines that seek knowledge *for its*

own sake, and not for the sake of some instrumental end. Knowledge is not about power or progress or control—it is about the fulfillment of human nature and human flourishing. The contemplative habits of mind that a liberal education cultivates is good without qualification because it contributes to human flourishing—it fulfills the natural, human desire we have to know and understand reality that so impressed Aristotle in the opening of the *Metaphysics* and Plato in his dialogue *Gorgias* and *Symposium*. It is this natural desire that is cultivated by a truly liberal education—it specifically directs it towards those questions that are fundamental to human life—what can we know about ourselves the world—and seeks a universal account.

Even further, I believe it is necessary to stress that the pursuit of wisdom, of universal knowledge, is essential to cultivating the interior freedom that is the foundation of moral and political life—otherwise known as human society. In order to live well (and not merely work well or make money to satisfy our basic needs) we must take the pursuit of wisdom seriously. If we have learned anything through this pandemic, it's that we cannot rely on mere expertise when we face tough political choices about when to give up our rights and liberties in the name of public health goals. Epidemiologists can tell us how to stop the spread of a daily virus, but they cannot tell us when it is right and just to limit personal freedoms. That takes a different kind of knowledge and thinking altogether.

A merely technocratic approach to higher education understands it as a training for a life of work. While such an education will always have its place in human society, a university

education cannot be reduced to this and remain *higher* in any deep or meaningful sense. In its essence, higher education concerns the cultivation of the human mind so that students can become *free*. By freedom here, I do not mean freedom from external constraints or pressures, freedom from coercive forces or violence. I certainly don't mean the mere freedom of consumer choice that so impresses Louis Menand. Such external freedom is important but I am speaking about an interior and spiritual condition. A truly free person *knows* what is true and good and beautiful and therefore is free to realize his own potential and flourish. The liberal arts is ordered to the cultivation of this kind of interior freedom. Liberal learning proceeds from the commitment to the proposition that without such knowledge, no one can be truly free. If all you have gained from your university is the sort of useful knowledge necessary for specialized work, and instrumentalized forms of reasoning, you have remained a slave to forces outside of yourself that you do not fully comprehend and are not equipped to do battle with. We may call this an education, but with what possible right would we call it a *higher* or *liberal* education?