

Modern American higher education is based on a number of historic assumptions which are inherent in the whole notion of the university. These assumptions are presently being challenged by a number of forces and trends which threaten the very existence of our institutions of higher learning.

In this article these assumptions and trends are reviewed and evaluated, and the conclusion is restated in terms of the necessity for the continuation of the assumptions as a basis for university survival.

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## Subjectivity and The University: A Paradox

Modern American higher education is an outgrowth of the medieval universities. Over the centuries the governance, structure, curricula and quality of education at these institutions of higher learning has changed and shifted in line with the expectations and demands made upon it by students, Pope, governor and society. The modern American university may bear scant resemblance to its medieval counterpart, but its essential quality remains: it is an institution existing for "the transmission of knowledge, the pursuit of truth, the development of students and the general well-being of society."<sup>1</sup>

Not all of these objectives have been consistently pursued by the university since its beginning. Conflicts between town and gown, student "nations" whose pragmatic purpose was almost totally social rather than intellectual, student control of university governance which had almost no relationship to academic standards and quality — these all contributed to the marginal functioning of the university in its above stated role.<sup>2</sup>

There is, however, a common commitment to objective truth that ties together all institutions of higher learning from medieval times to the present. Alfred North Whitehead in his discussion of the conceptual basis of science from its beginning makes a strong case for the necessity of a dependable natural order for its development. He states: "there can be no living science unless there is a widespread instinctive conviction in the existence of an Order of Things."<sup>3</sup> Aside from such an Order of Nature there would be "mere arbitrary mystery."<sup>4</sup> Whitehead also points out that the "expansion of universities" resulted from the same convictions that gave

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<sup>1</sup>"Joint Statement on Rights and Freedoms of Students," *AAUP Bulletin* (Winter, 1967), p. 365.

<sup>2</sup>See Charles Homer Haskins, *The Rise of Universities* (Ithica, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1957).

<sup>3</sup>Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1954), p. 5.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 27

rise to science.<sup>5</sup>

Whitehead's Order of Nature aside from which there would be mere arbitrary mystery, refers to an objective, enduring, dependable standard against which the variety of man's ideas and experiences can be measured. In its relationship to the development of universities such a notion implies that the individual is not the ultimate judge of truth, that the honest pursuit of truth will lead the seeker to a common discovery, and that each truth discovered, while tentative in nature, leads men on to an ever closer proximation of ultimate truth.

Whitehead's observations are crucial to this paper. If his assumptions are correct — and in this writer's view they are — then the current tendency in the American university to emphasize subjective truth<sup>6</sup> is striking at the heart of its own existence. Louis and Helen Geiger make essentially the same point when they state: "For a faculty to abdicate its role of intellectual guide and preceptor and to abandon the yardstick of standards . . . is to render itself unnecessary. The student critics of the universities are already on the road to the same conclusions."<sup>7</sup>

There are several historic assumptions underlying the existence of the university — assumptions that are valid but which are challenged by the subjectivistic mood of current academia. And this challenge constitutes a dilemma for the modern university.

The first historic assumption can be stated as follows: truth is objective and discoverable. The Idealist, Realist, and to some extent the Pragmatist, all held to this metaphysical notion. And the university was perceived as the most conducive environment for the discovery and dissemination of it. Cardinal Newman states: "To set forth the right standards, and to train according to it, and to help forward all students towards it according to their various capabilities, this, I conceive to be the business of the university"<sup>8</sup> And John S. Brubacher, a contemporary authority on higher education says: "In the field of knowledge or factual truth the university is society's court of last resort."<sup>9</sup>

The present writer has stated elsewhere that:

in the past the philosophical assumptions regarding the nature of man and knowledge have cemented the purpose and function of the university. Truth was objective, settled, and absolute; and the function of the university was to aid man in his search for it. It was

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<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 23

<sup>6</sup>Truth so conceived on the basis of personal, internal standards which are not objectively verifiable.

<sup>7</sup>Louis G. & Helen M. Geiger, "The Revolt Against Excellence," *AAUP Bulletin* (September, 1970), p. 300.

<sup>8</sup>John Henry Cardinal Newman, *The Idea of a University* (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1907), p. 153.

<sup>9</sup>John S. Brubacher, *The University: Its Identity Crisis* (New Britain, Conn.: Central Connecticut State College, 1972), p. 17.

further assumed that man could discover truth by philosophical reasoning and scientific research. Order, evident in the physical world, was assumed present in the world of ideas as well.<sup>10</sup>

Such an objective notion of truth gave society the courage to endow its universities and sponsor its scholars and intellectuals in order to open ever wider vistas of wisdom.

This objective notion of truth is currently losing ground in American universities. The situation is frequently seen as an erosion of academic excellence; the basic problem, however, is the same — man is intent on looking inside himself for a standard and is rejecting the imposition of standards by authorities. In this connection Evelyn Shirk has written: "One reason, among others, why there is a concerted attack on excellence in higher education today is the general move to overthrow the absolutism of the past. In its place has arisen a new dogma of pseudorelativism which is purely subjective in nature."<sup>11</sup>

Granted, the university must recognize the tentative nature of experimental proof. Science, properly conceived, is dealing with tentative truth which can never be stated as absolute. This is, however, a completely different notion from subjective truth. A tentative quality refers to an incomplete comprehension of objective truth, whereas a subjective notion of truth assumes the absence of truth outside of the individual — e.g., something may be true for one person and at the same time false for another.

The dilemma that this creates for the university is recognized by thinkers in various disciplines. Morgenthau notes it in the context of political science. He states:

Contemporary political thought is unable to answer these questions [e.g. questions regarding the abiding truth about politics and their applications to contemporary problems]; it is even unable to pose them. Its relativism prevents it from raising the perennial problem of distinction between truth and opinion. In so far as it is consistent in its relativism it cannot even distinguish among different opinions, provided they are socially acceptable.<sup>12</sup>

A second historical assumption, closely related to the above, is that truth is not untruth. This assumption is related to classic logic and says in effect, A is not non-A. Such a notion of universal truth provided the university with a rationale for existence, because it provided the community of scholars a common goal which was both fixed and attainable.

A third assumption underlying the university is that the teacher/professor is an authority in his field, and the student can indeed learn truth from him. Even in the medieval universities where students controlled the

<sup>10</sup>Milton K. Reimer, "How the University is Losing its Job," *His Magazine* (February, 1973), p. 15.

<sup>11</sup>Evelyn Shirk, "The Erosion of Excellence," *Intellect* (October, 1972), p. 22.

<sup>12</sup>Hans J. Morgenthau, *The Decline of Democratic Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 131.

university — “collected the fees, paid the salaries and issued working rules” and fined the teacher who was absent or evaded difficult aspects of his discipline<sup>13</sup> — the assumption of professor as authority in knowledge was basic. Indeed, the entire *raison d’etre* of the university and its faculties is based on such authority.<sup>14</sup> Hutchins states it succinctly: “Education implies teaching. Teaching implies knowledge. Knowledge is truth. The truth is everywhere the same.”<sup>15</sup> It follows then that the teacher represents a repository of truth which renders him an authority in *his field*.

The current milieu of higher education threatens this basic quality. John H. Bunzel, President of California State University, San Jose, identifies several threats to higher education, one of which is especially apropos to this point; he calls it “the appeal of subjectivism disguised as individualism.”<sup>16</sup> For an example Bunzel cites an incident which occurred in one of the California universities in which an established scholar with long experience in his field was charged by a student with infringing on his constitutional and individual rights because he made critical comments on his research paper.

In commenting on this incident and on the danger of unrestricted subjectivism, Bunzel states: “University life is one of those social relationships where it is essential to recognize the reality of differences in knowledge and authority without regarding these differences as adversarial in character or menacing to the human rights of the individual.”<sup>17</sup>

The distinction made by Bunzel is crucial. Authority in knowledge does not carry with it an inherent right to dominate others. Rather it assumes an inherent responsibility to make this knowledge available to all seekers. The ideal, of course, would be for all to arrive at a stage of genuine authority in knowledge; in reality this is unlikely.

C.S. Lewis, late Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge, deals with this same concept in the broader context of society; the implications, however, are applicable: he says that “until quite modern times the direct insight of the mystics and the reasonings of the philosophers percolated to the mass of people by authority and tradition. . . . Now, however, we must get the truth for ourselves or go without it.” Lewis wonders whether all men will now become wise so that there will be no need for the “sages.” In other words, is the time past for needing authority in knowledge?

Regardless of ones view of the status of authority in the present day as

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<sup>13</sup>Jaques Barzun, “Tomorrow’s University—Back to the Middle Ages?” *Saturday Review* (November 15, 1969), p. 23

<sup>14</sup>Note the statement by the Geigers quoted earlier.

<sup>15</sup>Robert M. Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1936), p. 66.

<sup>16</sup>John H. Bunzel, “Six New Threats to the Academy,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Jan. 14, 1974), p. 24.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

compared with the past, it is a question that demands an answer. Lewis concludes:

But let us make no mistake about our necessities. If we are content to go back and become humble plain men obeying tradition, well. If we are ready to climb and struggle on till we become sages ourselves, better still. But the man who will neither obey wisdom in others nor adventure for her himself is fatal. A society where the simple obey the few seers can live: a society where all were seers could live even more fully. But a society where the mass is still simple and the seers are no longer attended to can only achieve superficiality, baseness, ugliness, and in the end extinction.<sup>18</sup>

A fourth and final (for our consideration) historic assumption is that all truth is part of a unified whole, that there are ultimately no contradictions among disciplines. Cardinal Newman insists that, "all branches of knowledge are connected together, because the subject-matter of knowledge is intimately united in itself,"<sup>19</sup> and that, "knowledge in proportion as it tends more and more to be particular, ceases to be knowledge."<sup>20</sup> Brubacher also supports this assumption when he says: "Expertise at its sophisticated best is marked by the theory of knowledge or truth on which it rests. Its devotion to truth involves not only fidelity to physical reality but also dedication to theoretical simplicity, explanatory power, conceptual elegance, and *logical coherence*."<sup>21</sup> But subjectivism distorts this unity of truth. When truth is centered in the subjective it does not need to be consistent with external data; it can be found in a "blatant thrust beyond reason, a shooting free of mere cognition."<sup>22</sup> Such a subjective notion of truth strongly supports the earlier discussed challenge to authority.

A word needs to be said here about the fragmentation and departmentalization of disciplines in a typical university. The justification for such fragmentation has been the tremendous increase in knowledge in the various disciplines. The results, however, have often been less than desirable — narrow specialists whose comprehension of truth beyond the confines of their own discipline is almost non-existent. In discussing the problem of such fragmentation of knowledge in our universities Lewis Mayhew states: "The results of such a system of education were doctors who could scarcely communicate with their patients, engineers who had no feeling for the arts training of their wives, and psychologists who could not understand sociologists even in common conversation."<sup>23</sup> It would seem that a commitment to the unity of knowledge necessitates some attempt to diminish the effect of over specialization.

<sup>18</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1947), pp. 43-44.

<sup>19</sup>Newman, p. 99.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid*, p. 112.

<sup>21</sup>Brubacher, pp. 13-14. Italics mine.

<sup>22</sup>Van Cleve Morris, *Existentialism in Education* (New York: Harper & Row, Publisher, 1966), p. 104.

<sup>23</sup>Lewis B. Mayhew, *General Education: An Account and Appraisal* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1960), p. 5.

Although specialization is not necessarily associated with subjectivism, it may support it, albeit unwittingly. When specialists in a certain discipline pursue truth in their own field without regard to the data available in other fields they seem to imply that truth in one context may contradict truth in another and still be truth. It seems therefore that disunity and fragmentation of knowledge may be both cause and effect of a subjective notion of truth.

Perhaps it needs to be noted here that this is not a critique of specialization as such, or an attempt to promote a generalist approach in higher education. The so-called generalist has his own problems related to his likely lack of depth. Breadth without depth in scholarly wisdom makes the generalist even more susceptible to the siren song of subjective truth. Rather, the point here intended is to caution *over* specialization to the extent that there is no concern nor appreciation of the dove-tailing of truth in the various disciplines.

If the American university is to justify its existence, it will have to carefully consider and respond to these current challenges to its historic assumptions. Such a consideration must be made with a mind open to truth, for dogmatism has long been regarded as alien to true education. (The unrestrained pursuit of truth is another historic assumption basic to higher education.) It does not necessarily follow from the above that the university cannot change; indeed, the fact that it is a social institution makes change inevitable. But the changes that occur as higher education responds to the changes of social demands must avoid the excesses of subjectivism.

We return now to Whitehead's idea of an "Order of Things" as basic to the existence of the university. Such a notion of order was foundational to the rise of universities. This notion is currently challenged by a subjective view of truth and knowledge. It is difficult to imagine a viable university within the context of subjectively conceived truth. Therefore if knowledge and truth are indeed subjective, if the notion of authority is *passé*, if all men are now sages, perhaps it is time to close the doors of these costly institutions and encourage individuals to generate their own truth in environments of their own choosing.