

Newman and Nussbaum on the Purpose of Higher Education

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1. Introduction

In this paper, we explore some of the thought of John Henry Cardinal Newman and Martha Nussbaum on the purpose and value of higher education and the humanities in particular. Newman focuses on what the humanities contribute to *the university* (Section 2); Nussbaum focuses on what the humanities contribute to *society* (Section 3). After having sketched their views, we consider some similarities and differences (Section 4). We close with a brief conclusion (Section 5).

2. Newman on What the Humanities Contribute to the University

John Henry Newman is famous for many things, one of them his views on the university, as laid out in his magisterial *The Idea of the University* (1982 (1873)). In this section, we discuss his views on the role of the humanities in the university (page references are to the 1982 edition). But we must begin with what Newman conceived of as the aim or ‘object’—the *raison d’être*—of the university. It will, no doubt, surprise the modern reader what Newman affirms, as well as what he denies here. The very first sentences of the Preface to the book reads:

The view taken of a University in these Discourses is the following: That it is a place of *teaching* universal *knowledge*. This implies that its object is, on the one hand, intellectual, not moral; and, on the other, that it is the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than the advancement. (p. xxxvii)

To this he immediately adds that, practically speaking, a university “cannot fulfil its object duly ... without the Church’s assistance; or, to use a theological term, the Church is necessary for its *integrity*” (ibid.).

Surprising for the modern reader is Newman’s affirmation that the ‘object’, the aim, the purpose of a university (what it aims to achieve) is *intellectual*, and his denial that its objective is *moral*. Nowadays many will say that at least a significant part of the *raison d’être* of universities is that they have *practical* aims, such as: forming and molding their students in ways that turn them into competent professionals in complex practices such as medicine, jurisprudence, entrepreneurship, administration, government and international commerce. (p. 80) And in the wake of the banking crisis many will include in this the ethical formation of its students—Nussbaum, as we shall see below, is one among many others. Not for Newman: for him, the objective of the university is the cultivation of the intellects of its students. And this is done when students absorb knowledge, not as instrumental for further purposes the students may try to attain, “but as an end sufficient to rest in and to pursue for its own sake” (p. 78). This is knowledge for knowledge’s sake—and hence not something St. Bernard of Clairvaux would look upon favorably. As he famously said, “Some people know so as to be known as knowers; that is

vanity. Some people know in order to know; that is curiosity. Some people know in order to be edified; that is wisdom. Some people know in order to edify; that is love.”

Also surprising for the modern reader is Newman’s affirmation that the objective of the university is *teaching*, so ‘diffusion and extension’ (i.e., transmission) of knowledge—not ‘advancement’ of knowledge, not *research*! Most modern readers will conceive of universities not only as centers of education, but perhaps first and foremost as centers of research. As a matter of fact, the expression ‘research university’ sounds to many an ear as a pleonasm. Not for Newman: for him, the *exclusive* ‘object’ of the university is *teaching*—teaching, as he says, ‘universal knowledge’. As he thinks of it, what we now call “research” ought to be done outside the halls of academia!

What is this universal knowledge that universities are supposed to teach? First, it is *knowledge*, in contrast with opinion, conjecture, hypothesis, or theory that is at best probable. If something is knowledge, then, Newman held, it is certain and true. The expression ‘universal knowledge’ refers to the *scope* of what is known: knowledge is universal provided it comprises *everything* that is known, provided no area harboring certain truths is consistently left out, or systematically left out of consideration.

At this point, Newman touches upon a precursor of what has become known as the demarcation problem: the problem of how to distinguish science from non-science. He urges that knowledge cannot be confined to ‘the evidence of our senses’ for then ethics, which is also a branch of knowledge, would be excluded. Nor can it be restricted to what we can know through rational intuition, for then history, another branch of knowledge too, would also be excluded. Nor can it be limited to what we know by testimony, for then metaphysics would be excluded. Nor can it be only abstract reasoning, for then physics would be excluded.

However, if knowledge cannot be so confined, then theology, conceived of as the knowledge of God, is part of the ‘universal knowledge’ that must be taught at the university—for, says Newman, “Is not the being of God reported to us by testimony, handed down by history, inferred by an inductive process, brought home to us by metaphysical necessity, urged on us by the suggestions of our conscience?” (p. 19). Newman gives rough overviews of what it is that can be known about God, in addition to his existence: God is an individual, self-dependent, all-perfect, unchangeable, intelligent, living, personal, and present, without origin, creator and upholder of the universe, “one in whose hands are all things, who has a purpose in every event, and a standard for every deed, and thus has relations of His own towards the subject-matter of each particular science which the book of knowledge unfolds; who has with an adorable, never-ceasing energy implicated Himself in all the history of creation, the constitution of nature, the course of the world, the origin of society, the fortunes of the nations, the action of the human mind; and who thereby necessarily becomes the subject-matter of a science, far wider and more noble than any of those which are included in the circle of secular education” (p. 27).

Universities, then, should teach universal knowledge, including knowledge about God (theology), but also knowledge about the many (other) subject matters that are studied in the humanities. Newman offers a substantive reason *why* it is that universal knowledge must be taught. We might gloss this reason by saying that he thinks there is no acceptable alternative to it. This is because, as he says, “all knowledge forms a whole.” And all knowledge forms a whole, “because the subject-matter of knowledge is intimately related in itself”. Why or how? Because they are all “the acts and the work of the Creator”. For this reason the sciences “have multiple bearings one on another, and an internal sympathy. ... They complete, correct and balance each

other.” We should be careful, Newman warns, not “to give undue prominence to one” of the sciences, as that “unsettles the boundary lines between science and science”, “disturbs their action” and “destroys the harmony which binds them together” (p. 75).

Newman had a strong view of the difference between what one science can tell us all by itself, as contrasted with what it tells us when it is seen as part of the bigger whole of knowledge: “There is no science but tells a different tale, when viewed as a portion of a whole, from what it is likely to suggest when taken by itself, without the safeguard, as I may call it, of others” (ibid.). He illustrates this non-reductionistic view of the encyclopedic coherence of the sciences and humanities by means of a perceptive analogy: “In the combination of colors, very different effects are produced by a difference in their selection and juxta-position; red, green, and white, change their shades, according to the contrast to which they are submitted” (ibid.).

In a striking passage, Newman illustrates this view by means of a thought experiment. What is striking about it is that what he presented as a thought experiment, has later been presented by Daniel Dennett (of whose work Loes Derksen is an avid reader) as an implication of science! The thought experiment is to imagine “a system of scientific teaching” in which “the agency of man in the material world” cannot be recognized. “Volition” is a forbidden term and “the mind and its powers” should not be spoken of—except to account for *why* they should not be spoken of. This “system of scientific teaching” pronounces “the influence of the mind in the visible world a superstition” and accounts for every affect that is found in the world “by the operation of physical causes.” This system likewise contemplates the ideas of duty, right, etc. as places in the “eternal system of physical cause and effect” (pp. 41–43) Newman takes this thought experiment to show that if physics is given “undue prominence”, we wind up with a completely skewed view of the world. It demonstrates that physics needs to be complemented with psychology and ethics. But Dennett (1987, 2017) thinks that if we take science seriously, there is nothing *there* for physics to be complemented with—and hence he does away with the efficacy of human intentions. Newman would see this as the thought of a “most low-minded speculator” (as he called Hume, p. 30). Juxtaposed to knowledge coming from theology, psychology—and, we could add, the humanities—knowledge of the physical world takes on entirely different colors, or, to revert to a quotation that we gave earlier on, physical knowledge is “completed, corrected and balanced” when seen as part of the bigger whole of knowledge.

Newman paints the picture of a certain type of intellectual that is fully engaged in only one science—the intellectual who has become “a person of one idea”, who adopts principles that are “all of them true to a certain point, yet all degenerating into error and quackery, because they are carried to excess, viz. at the point where they require interpretation and restraint from other quarters.” Newman quips, “a little science is not deep philosophy” (p. 58).

3. Nussbaum on the Value of the Humanities for Democracy

In contrast with Newman, Martha Nussbaum does not focus on what the humanities contribute to the *university*, but on what they contribute to *society*, more specifically to a *democratic* society. This societal focus is, of course, entirely legitimate, as even, say, the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* makes explicit that this is one of the very purposes of education:

Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote

understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
(Available at: http://www.claiminghumanrights.org/udhr_article_26.html)

In her work, especially in her 2010 book *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Nussbaum argues that the humanities are indispensable for the flourishing of people in a democratic society (page references in what follows are to this book). Nussbaum defends what she calls the ‘Human Development paradigm’ over against the ‘growth-based model’ in international development circles: “What is important is the opportunities, or “capabilities,” each person has in key areas ranging from life, health, and bodily integrity to political liberty, political participation, and education.” (p. 24) As she points out, even if universities were (wrongly) to confine themselves to furthering economic growth, the issue of how to reach that goal is thoroughly permeated with questions from the humanities. For example, when it comes to analyzing economic growth, does it matter what the situation of the *average* person is or should we (also) consider how the least well-off are doing? Answering such a question requires careful thinking about distribution and social inequality (p. 22). Of course, these questions should be addressed within those disciplines, such as economy, themselves, but it seems to us that Nussbaum is right that the humanities can provide all sorts of valuable knowledge, understanding, and tools, such as critical thought about justice and inequality, that various other disciplines can use.

In her views on the value of the humanities, she is strongly influenced by the works of American pragmatist John Dewey, who argues that education should be aimed at achieving of a life of rich significance (cf. Dewey 1916), and the Indian philosopher Rabindranath Tagore, who defends the idea that the purpose of education is moral formation and intellectual autonomy (cf. Tagore 1917).

Nussbaum draws attention to a world-wide crisis in academic education and suggests that one of the main reasons for this is the commercialization of universities, which typically comes at the cost of the humanities. She focuses on India and North-America, but plausibly maintains that developments in these countries are representative for those world-wide. She notes that, because of the focus on output and the marginalization of the humanities, universities all over the world will soon be producing nothing but what she calls “generations of useful machines” (p. 2). Students acquire a lot of knowledge about a particular, often rather limited, field, but fail to become complete citizens or even persons: They are not taught how to think for themselves, to criticize tradition, to understand the achievements and sufferings of other people, and so on. In fact, the situation elsewhere, for instance in continental Europe, may even be worse, as the United States still have the liberal arts model of education and has a strong emphasis on active class participation by inquiry and questioning.

Academic education, Nussbaum argues, should provide for at least three things. And, as we shall see below, the humanities are uniquely important for all of them. First, *intellectual autonomy* is needed, that is, *the ability to think for oneself* and to criticize dead or inadequate traditions (p. 109). Both Dewey and Tagore already criticized the treatment of students as passive vessels of received knowledge and cultural values and encouraged rigorous inquiry and questioning. Capacities for critical thinking and reflection are not part of our natural endowment, but need to be developed and fostered. Of course, the humanities are devoted to cultivation of the life of the mind (p. 10). What she does not emphasize, but, presumably, also has in mind, is that universities

should teach students *what tradition says* and *how to use it*. After all, building on a certain tradition is typically not just inevitable but also highly fruitful.

Second, *empathy* should be taught. The virtue of empathy enables us to comprehend what other people have achieved and how they suffer. This is crucial to becoming a properly functioning person in today's complex society, as Nussbaum has argued in earlier works (e.g., Nussbaum 1997, 2004). Here, she has in mind such things as recognizing one's fellow citizens as people with equal rights, and having a deep concern for the lives and well-being of others. This will bring about an "ability to imagine well a variety of complex issues affecting the story of a human life as it unfolds: to think about childhood, adolescence, family relationships, illness, death, and much more in a way informed by an understanding of a wide range of human stories, not just by aggregate data" (p. 26). Nussbaum acknowledges that empathy itself is only an *ingredient* (albeit a crucial one) of morality and *not* morality itself: "Compassion is not reliable in and of itself. Like the other animals, human beings typically feel compassion toward those they know, and not toward those they don't know" (p. 37).

Therefore, there is a third task for university education: *moral formation*. People have a disposition to act rightly, but also a disposition to act wrongly, and the university can and should teach people to move away from egoism towards the good life. This includes thinking about the nation as a whole and seeing one's own nation as part of a complicated world order. One of Nussbaum's ideas is that there is a tendency towards evil in people and that education can help them to channel this destructive force in a more edifying direction. She agrees with Rousseau when he writes:

A child's first sentiment is to love himself; and the second, which derives from the first, is to love those who come near him, for in the state of weakness that he is in, he does not recognize anyone except by the assistance and care he receives. (Rousseau, 1762: Book IV)

Now, Rousseau was not entirely negative about children's nature; he thought that children also have all sorts of natural instincts towards love and compassion. Yet, according to Nussbaum, "he understood that the very weakness and neediness of human infants gives rise to a dynamic that can create ethical deformation and cruel behavior, unless narcissism and the tendency to dominate are channeled in a more productive direction." (p. 31) For her argument, she relies not only on the views advocated by such philosophers as Rousseau, but also on empirical research, such as the famous Stanford Prison Experiment by Philip Zimbardo and others (Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo 1973). According to Nussbaum, the experiment shows that people behave badly when they are not held personally accountable, when nobody raises a critical voice, and when the human beings over whom they have power are dehumanized and de-individualized (p. 44). Students should thus learn that each person is responsible and accountable.

According to Nussbaum, who is thoroughly inspired by Tagore on this point, the humanities have something unique to offer here that is pivotal for these three tasks in university education. She mentions *three* aspects of the humanities that are each relevant for reaching all three goals of academic education just discussed.

First, the humanities, or at least some of them, are specialized in Socratic argument: systematic and careful questioning of underlying assumptions, implicit frameworks, and values. This has ramifications for the way students approach an issue: important aspects will not be

missed by inadvertence or haste, students do not give in to any pressure related to fame or cultural prestige, goals pursued will be seen more clearly in relation to each other, and so on. And, of course, *logic*—another important discipline in at least some of the humanities—helps here: many stereotypes work through fallacious inference and the ability to detect fallacies is one of things that make democratic life decent and good. She rightly points out that Catholic universities and colleges in the United States already require two courses in philosophy for all students and advocates the view that *all* universities and colleges adopt this policy (p. 55)—a practice that, we are happy to remind the reader, the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam has implemented since its foundation and to which Loes Derksen has contributed for many years.

Second, the humanities can expose students to the world's various cultures and to the world's religions. Based on her earlier work (Nussbaum 2004), she argues that doing so will change our views towards unfamiliar others, which are often based on subconscious attitudes such as disgust towards minorities and people who belong to another group (pp. 45f). As she rightly points out, “responsible citizenship requires . . .: the ability to assess historical evidence, to use and think critically about economic principles, to assess accounts of social justice, to speak a foreign language, to appreciate the complexities of the major world religions” (p. 93). It requires little argument to see that the humanities, including theology, religious studies, philosophy, literature, and anthropology, are better equipped to do this than any of the sciences.

Third, the humanities can provide students with deep and informed appreciation of music, the fine arts, theater, and dance. It seems to us that Nussbaum is right that the humanities have something unique to offer here, as they of course study music, fine arts, theater, and dance. Yet, much of the value that Nussbaum draws attention to, such as that of play in the arts—which, she says “supplies a crucial . . . precondition of concern: the ability to imagine what the experience of another might be like” (p. 97)—comes from these arts and engaging in these arts themselves, *not* so much the study of these arts as we find it in the humanities. According to Nussbaum, for instance, “play teaches people to be capable of living with others without control; it connects the experiences of vulnerability and surprise to curiosity and wonder, rather than to crippling anxiety” (p. 101). We think this is true. What follows, though, is that people should engage in play of various kinds, *not* that they should engage in the humanities that study such play. Even so, though, the humanities, of course, offer something unique here, namely *reflection on* and *insight into* such play. Engaging in, say, theater and then jointly reflecting on it, as the humanities do, will certainly be of great value and contribute to turning students into complete citizens.

4. Similarities and Differences between Newman and Nussbaum

This completes our all too brief overviews of two important thinkers on the role and value of the humanities. In this final section, we want to draw attention to some similarities and differences between them. Again, we cannot aspire to completeness here, but limit ourselves to some initial—and, to our minds, striking—observations.

First of all, Newman and Nussbaum both emphasize the importance of becoming acquainted with tradition, but to rather different ends. Exaggerating somewhat, we might say that, for Newman, tradition can be trusted and hence must be cultivated and built upon, whereas, for Nussbaum, tradition must be distrusted, criticized and improved upon. Recall that Newman held that the objective of university education is to ‘diffuse and extend’ knowledge and not to

‘advance’ it. In Nussbaum, the focus is on the limiting and even oppressive effects of tradition, which need to be overcome through critical and creative thought. Strictly speaking, they may both be right, depending on which traditions are deemed ‘dead and inadequate’ and ready for dismissal and which can continue to serve as sources of inspiration for articulating and experimenting with ideals of the good life. Given their very different historical, cultural, and religious contexts and leanings, however, they would surely differ sharply on the evaluation and appreciation of particular cultural and religious traditions.

We surmise—unsurprisingly, perhaps—that the truth may well lie in between these views. On the one hand, a university education that focuses on acquainting students with tradition *in order to criticize it* will produce relativists or nihilists. Surely that can hardly count as an improvement over Nussbaum’s ‘useful machines’. On the other hand, an education that is aimed primarily at conservation and extension of tradition runs the risk of producing dogmatists and rigid conservatives. We need both sympathetic transmission and extension of traditions, as well as constructive-critical reformation and criticism. For both projects, thorough familiarization with diverse traditions of thought is nonetheless of great importance.

Second, when we dig a little deeper into Newman’s and Nussbaum’s views, the contrast we have just drawn between them can be qualified. Nussbaum emphasizes autonomous thought and criticism in order to guard against one-sided or otherwise ill-conceived notions of well-being, equality, justice, citizenship etc. Newman insists on the ‘wholeness’ of universal knowledge, thus cautioning against the risks of absolutizing one academic discipline and ignoring others. The risk involved in this is that of a reductionist, and hence misleading and false, worldview, which inevitably leads to misguided views of human nature, society, and the good life. In spite of their different starting points, then, these warnings sound conspicuously congenial. Perhaps we can understand this once we realize that tradition, for Newman, is a broad and rich vessel tried and tested insight in the universe, human nature, and the good life. Accordingly, it is also a resource with tremendous critical potential against reductionistic views or other positions which fail to do justice to the breadth of human knowledge and experience that is stored in tradition. When Nussbaum emphasizes the importance of criticizing traditions that are dead and inadequate, we can perhaps think precisely of such lopsided and narrow schools of thought which fail to engage the fullness of lived human experiences.

Third, it is remarkable how Newman and Nussbaum appear to agree on the evaluation of basic human nature. Put succinctly, both of them take a bleak view of it: human nature is beset by a basic disposition towards evil which must be mitigated or overcome. There can be no doubt that their sources for this conviction are rather different. A devout Catholic, Newman subscribed to traditional Christian teaching on man’s fallen state and sinful nature. Nussbaum, in contrast, defers to the French enlightenment thinker Rousseau—who explicitly rejected the idea of original sin and whose revolutionary views on religion hardly qualify as Catholic in any traditional or non-traditional sense—and to contemporary psychological research.

In view of these underlying differences, it is no surprise that Newman and Nussbaum differ in what they think a university education, or more specifically a liberal arts education, can do about this human disposition towards evil. Newman is mostly silent here, as can be expected. The traditional Christian view is that man’s corrupted and sinful nature must be overcome by a gracious act of God. A university education might be instrumental in this, but there is no special reason to think this will be so in general. Instead, university education serves a theoretical purpose; to shape students’ intellect and to teach them ‘universal knowledge’. As we saw,

Nussbaum thinks that the humanities have a key part to play in mitigating humans' evil tendencies and channeling them towards the good. By inculcating empathy and striving for moral formation, a (successful) liberal arts education can set people on a path to the good life, both for themselves and for their fellow citizens worldwide. For our part, we believe Nussbaum sets out an inspiring ideal, but we worry about the feasibility of the kind of deep formation she thinks is desirable in modern universities. When research is prioritized above teaching and when the STEM disciplines crowd out the humanities, we can hardly expect students to be transformed in the way Nussbaum envisions. This is not supposed to be a criticism of Nussbaum's vision; we mention it to emphasize how far many modern universities have moved away from her ideal.

This brings us directly to a fourth and final point of comparison between Newman and Nussbaum: their sharply contrasting views on the fundamental objective of education. Newman is explicit that this 'object' is intellectual and not moral. Nussbaum, at least in *Not for Profit*, stresses the fundamental *practical* importance of the humanities for democracy. This should not be thought to exclude intellectual purposes altogether—after all, democracy requires *well-informed* citizens—but the point of higher learning is not knowledge for the sake of knowledge, but moral transformation and, ultimately, political transformation aimed at justice, increased well-being, and other distinctly moral values. We take it that Newman is not opposed to these things; he just doesn't believe they are what the university is for. It seems likely—although this is admittedly speculation on our part—that Newman's Christian faith is again behind this. Moral virtues, both cardinal and theological, spring from faith, not university learning.

Although we would like for Nussbaum's views to be true and for higher education to have the morally edifying effect she describes so compellingly, we worry that she might be overoptimistic. As far as we know, the systematic empirical evidence on the morally transforming effect of reading and studying literature and other arts is inconclusive at best. Even a cursory glance at contemporary American, British, and European politics provides one with pretty substantial disconfirmation of the idea that a liberal education or thorough training in a humanities discipline produces morally upstanding character. Perhaps Newman's morally less ambitious view of the object of a university education is more realistic and we must look elsewhere for moral transformation.

5. Conclusion

Never waste a good crisis, the saying goes. At the moment, cries that the contemporary university is in crisis are echoed loudly and widely. The time is ripe, then, not only to ask fundamental questions about the nature and purpose of universities, but also to try to answer them—sometimes perhaps along traditional lines, sometimes more critically.

In this essay, we have attempted to listen to two important voices in order to make progress with this project: that of John Henry Cardinal Newman and that of Martha Nussbaum. *In spite of* their different historical, cultural, and religious backgrounds, both appear to agree on the fundamental importance of the humanities—for the life of the mind or for democratic citizenship. *Thanks to* their different historical, cultural, and religious backgrounds, they also set forth interestingly contrasting visions of the ultimate purpose of a university education: either intellectual and theoretical—knowledge for the sake of knowledge—, or moral and political—furthering the pursuit of the good life in a democratic society.

As participants in the contemporary debate about the role and responsibilities of the university, we would do well to take heed of Newman's and Nussbaum's visions. And this is true regardless of whether we decide that their answers must merely be 'diffused and extended' or that they must be sympathetically criticized and advanced.

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