



The Good Society and Universities

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Proverbs 20: 1–15 Romans 12: 1–8

‘There is gold, and a multitude of rubies:
but the lips of **knowledge** are a precious jewel.’

The verse from Proverbs reminds us of the value of knowledge. In doing so, it reminds us of the value of our University. For are the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge not the essence of what we do?

Reflections on the value of universities are plentiful. The genre has flourished since the establishment of universities like Bologna, Paris and Oxford. As with all genres, this one has developed its own canon.

One does not need to spend too much time reading about the subject before coming across Cardinal John Henry Newman, founder of University College Dublin, who in 1852 published a series of lectures that he called *The Idea of a University*.

Pondering the purpose of a university education, Newman remarked:

If [...] a practical end must be assigned to a University course, I say it is that of training good members of society... It is the education which gives a man a clear, conscious view of their own opinions and judgements, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them. It teaches him to see things as they are, to go right to the point, to disentangle a skein of thought to detect what is sophistical and to discard what is irrelevant.

I like Newman’s emphasis on ‘training good members of society’. There is an ethical dimension to the education he envisions – he was a clergyman, after all. And would ‘training good members of society’ not be an essential first step towards the creation of a good society?

There is also, as Newman sees it, an imperative to foster critical thought: a university education gives men (it was men, back then) a clear view of their own opinions and judgements. It teaches them to see things as they are. To detect what is sophistical; to discard what is irrelevant – and this over a century and a half before anyone had coined the phrase ‘fake news’.

Though Newman’s exhortation to train good members of society and to nurture critical thinking remain hugely relevant, today’s higher education landscape would, in many ways, seem unrecognisable to Newman. There were nine universities in Great Britain in the 1850s,

when he published his lecture series. Today there are around 130. Only a small minority would have attended university at the time. Today nearly half of England's 18-25 year olds are enrolled in higher education.

Meanwhile, the relationship between universities and society has been fundamentally modified – in terms of how universities are funded, how they are regulated, and what society expects of them. As those expectations have changed, so too have our notions of how universities contribute to a good society – or even to social good.

When I hear the value of modern universities being called into question, as it often is in public debates, there is a thought experiment I like to engage in. Imagine what would happen if research-intensive universities like Cambridge simply did not exist. What would we be missing? In what alternative settings might young people with career aspirations be able to make that crucial transition from the world of school to the world of work? Where might those young women and men have the time or space to take on new ideas, to challenge them, and to develop their own? Where might their potential for leadership – academic, entrepreneurial, political, civic – be freely incubated and honed? Who might our societies task with delivering the discoveries and innovations that will fuel our countries' development? Who else has the convening power to bring together governments, international organisations, businesses, the non-profit sector and leading researchers and thinkers to find common solutions to urgent global problems? Critically: what other institutions might be able – or might even aspire – to do all of these things at once?

Of course I am biased, but I struggle to think of any.

It is true that universities' uniqueness as institutions does not give them the licence to divorce themselves from the expectations of the societies they serve. Indeed, the public trust placed in universities depends on universities' ability to demonstrate that they take society's goals and hopes seriously.

When society does not feel we have its interests at heart, it is up to us to improve the ways we engage with it and communicate about what we do, how we do it and why. So universities have to be good at listening to our society – locally, nationally, globally. And we have to be better at sharing with society the knowledge that we create.

Earlier this week, a long-awaited report – the Augar Review of Post-18 Education – was finally published. One of its recommendations is about the reduction of fees for undergraduate education, raising once again questions about the value of a university education. We know that a university education provides students with the skills that will prepare them for employment. We know that well-trained graduates will contribute to the economy. But let's dwell on some of the benefits of a university education that are just as, or even more, meaningful – even if not so easily measurable.

When we refer to skills, we mean not just what graduates know, or what technical abilities they have gained, but also those essential 'softer' skills – resilience, sociability, the ability to think critically. Bringing the mind into form, to use Newman's words.

For most students (this is certainly the case in the UK and in North America), university offers the first experience of living away from home. It is often their first experience of having to manage finances, relationships and workloads on their own – all essential for later on in life. Higher education widens horizons – not just by making a graduate employable, but by broadening her mind. In fact, I think that one of the greatest joys of education is in fostering uncertainty. Mark Twain described education as 'the path from cocky ignorance to miserable uncertainty.'

At that key liminal phase between adolescence and adulthood, universities are ideal environments in which to be exposed to new, often deeply challenging ideas and to discover new interests. Despite the pressures of the curriculum, of exams and papers, they are often the first opportunity for students to come across new types of literature, or music, or other mind-altering intellectual and emotional content. A university education is the perfect platform for self-fashioning, self-experimentation, and building self-knowledge. It is a big stepping stone in the ongoing process of defining one's identity. There is probably no other time in a person's life where this can be done as freely and as fruitfully.

The great American poet, Robert Frost, remarked that 'education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence'. Balancing self-assertion with listening may be the greatest form of resilience in a complex, plural society.

To many, a university education will offer the first real opportunity to live at close quarters, and in strict parity, with fellow students from the most varied countries, backgrounds, ethnicities and world-views. It will provide an invaluable chance to understand through personal experience that, in the words of St Paul, we have 'gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us'. At its best, a university education can be a crucible for real intercultural understanding – much needed in a world where differences are so easily magnified.

And think of the lasting bonds of friendship forged on the path of higher education, between people on similar voyages of learning and self-discovery. (How many couples found themselves drawn to each other in their student years?)

The tremendous potential that can be unleashed by passage through university is vividly illustrated in a brilliant memoir, *Educated*, by Tara Westover, a former Cambridge Gates Scholar. For Dr Westover, who grew up badly home-schooled and isolated in a Mormon family in rural Idaho, dominated by a father who did not believe in the state, a university education was a way to escape a life of violence and emotional abuse. Later, the opportunity to come to Cambridge for a postgraduate degree was more than an act of defiance, or even intellectual development. It became a step in Dr Westover's path to self-affirmation. 'When I was a child,' she writes, 'I waited for my mind to grow, for my experiences to accumulate and my choices to solidify, taking shape into the likeness of a person.' Having broken away from a zealot father and violent brother, she reflected: 'The decisions I made after that moment were not the ones [my sixteen-year-old self] would have made. They were the choices of a changed person, a new self. You could call this selfhood many things. Transformation. Metamorphosis... I call it an education.'

There – in the potential it offers for transformation– lies the huge power – and the indisputable value – of higher education. There – in its inherent capacity to instigate metamorphosis – lies one of the most significant contributions universities can make to the building of a good society.

Allow me, as I finish my reflections, to reach for a quote by Rabbi Leo Baeck, who in his book *The Essence of Judaism* said the following:

A minority is compelled to think; that is the blessing of its fate. It must always persist in a mental struggle for that consciousness of truth which success and power comfortingly assure to rulers and their supporting multitudes. The conviction of the many is based on the weight of possession; the conviction of the few is expressed through the energy of constant searching and finding.

'The energy of constant searching and finding'... That, to me, sums up the purpose of a university – certainly of a university like Cambridge. To channel that energy. And ultimately, to contribute – in all the ways we are able to – to what the Rabbi called the struggle for that consciousness of truth.

We do it, as Newman wanted us to, by 'training good members of society'.

We do it by educating the men and women who come to us, and preparing them for a world of work and a world of relationships; for a world filled with beauty but also with real problems; for a world in which they will have to stand on their own two feet, and be resilient.

We do it by unleashing creativity and leadership in all its forms.

We do it by creating a place for world-changing ideas to develop, to be challenged, and to flourish.

We do it by leveraging our combined intellectual capacity to address some of the planet's most pressing problems – exploiting the power of artificial intelligence for the benefit of society, or delivering new life-saving treatments for cancer, or finding ways of halting neuro-degenerative diseases, by imagining the future of democracy, or understanding the roots of fundamentalism in all its forms.

We do it by harnessing that energy of constant searching and finding.

We do it by creating, curating and communicating knowledge – because the lips of knowledge are a precious jewel.

I can think of no higher calling.