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Truth U, Justice U, Jesus U

Joseph Clair

COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS in the liberal arts (humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences) are almost entirely left-leaning, liberal, or progressive, and this is especially true among faculty in the humanities and social sciences. Insofar as political party affiliation is representative, the statistics are stunning—roughly 12:1 Democrat to Republican in the humanities and social sciences nationally, and this ratio is even more pronounced in certain selective schools (Brown University takes the cake with 60:1).¹ Students who attend liberal arts colleges or universities (that is, non-trade, non-vocational schools that require core curricula and keep an array of majors in the disciplines of the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences) often adopt more liberal or progressive points of view as a result of their education. There are many great literary depictions of this transformation and the ensuing alienation that often results when such students return home from college. My favorite is

in Flannery O'Connor's short story, "Revelation," where a young woman in a doctor's office throws her human development textbook at the unenlightened, uncouth, hometown character Ruby Turpin.² Is this phenomenon accidentally related to the demography of the professoriate or somehow intrinsically related to the craft and content of the liberal arts themselves and the culture and atmosphere of the campus?

Despite frequently being casually conflated, the terms "liberal" and "progressive" represent different political traditions in the West, and when applied to the liberal arts represent different approaches to education. "Liberal" liberal arts education represents a modern vision of the disciplines oriented toward an Enlightenment-style view of objective truth pursued by rational and empirical methods, whereas "progressive" is often associated today with postmodern visions of education that are suspicious of privileged categories such as knowledge, truth, and understanding. Progressive liberal arts education is aimed toward dismantling systems of illegitimate power and ensuring equality of outcomes for all. Melded with this mission of social justice is a corresponding emphasis on trauma and the paradoxes and slipperiness of selfhood and identity.

NYU social psychologist Jonathan Haidt argues that these two visions of the liberal arts are ultimately incompatible, and that universities ought to be forced to make a choice between the aims of objective truth and social justice, and organize academic life accordingly.³ Haidt creates a helpful typology, calling the "liberal" approach "Truth U" and the progressive approach "Social Justice U."

He notes that almost every major liberal arts institution in America today has become a Social Justice U, by default of the demography of the professoriate. One notable exception is the University of Chicago, with its classically liberal commitments enshrined in its “Chicago Principles” on academic freedom.⁴

Haidt notes that some religious colleges in America present themselves as pursuing an entirely different telos, or guiding goal, altogether, outside of his binary framework. Haidt points to Wheaton College in Illinois as an example whose mission is explicitly to “serve Jesus Christ and advance His Kingdom.” Haidt calls this exceptional case “Jesus U” and does not seem to take it seriously. Haidt is committed to his own liberal, Enlightenment-style vision of the liberal arts, inspired by the classical liberalism of J. S. Mill.

To answer the question of whether the liberal arts are inherently liberal or progressive requires that we first tease apart the liberal and progressive adaptations of liberal education. Haidt’s dichotomy of Truth U and Social Justice U helpfully encapsulates the difference between them. Both the liberal and progressive approaches to the liberal arts retain something essential from the earlier tradition but both deviate significantly from the classical and Christian view of the human person that gave birth to the earliest universities and liberal arts colleges in Europe and America. The “liberal” liberal arts approach of Truth U retains the classical and fundamental insistence on the connection between intellectual cultivation and citizenship, yet it abandons the transcendent framework by which truth-pursuit can be understood as an expression of our

deepest human telos. The progressive approach of Social Justice U retains something essential from the specifically Christian insistence on the connection between liberal learning and neighbor-love, yet it abandons the redemptive vision the Christian story brings to critiques of power, care for victims, and confession of sin.

For these reasons, we ought to take Christian liberal arts institutions more seriously than Haidt does. Such a model is a viable alternative to the liberal or progressive adaptations of the liberal arts on offer today. This tradition is capacious enough to be appealing to Christians and non-Christians alike, and is adaptable to other religious or philosophical approaches that do not fit neatly into either the liberal or progressive approaches to the liberal arts. The Christian university of the twenty-first century ought to present a picture of the human person and the role of intellectual cultivation in human flourishing that transcends the impasse of liberal and progressive approaches to the liberal arts.

Truth U, or the “Liberal” Liberal Arts

The ancient Greco-Roman view of the liberal arts was associated with the special status of being a free person (*liber*) rather than a servant or slave (*servus*) – a *servus* was a person for whom training in the manual or mechanical (servile) arts was most fitting. Free people needed the intellectual agility and capacity for thought and communication embedded in the *liber*-al arts to participate in free, self-governing societies. The liberal arts are by

definition liberalizing—they make someone more suited for citizenship in a free society and intellectually agile enough to engage a variety of viewpoints with subtlety and generosity. The ancient founders of the liberal arts could not have imagined the modern American attempt to extend this vision to include all human beings (including women, slaves, foreigners, et al.) on the scale of a democratic republic with over three hundred million citizens. The slow unfolding of civil rights and the expansion of the liberal arts have worked in tandem in American democracy. Yet this project is now under attack from many angles: ideological differences threaten to shatter our ideals, values, and shared sense of the past; general education in the liberal arts evaporates in an effort to hasten time to completion and decrease cost and student debt; career orientation erodes the numbers of students willing to major in liberal arts disciplines.

Christians have historically prized the liberal arts—whether in their classical form as the trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and quadrivium (geometry, arithmetic, music, and astronomy) or their modern disciplinary expression as the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences—as being in the whole community’s interest and related to our common humanity as divine-image bearers. So both the original Greco-Roman vision and the Christian adaptation of it presume a certain picture of the human person as a creature for whom intellectual cultivation and leisure are fitting.

The true telos of liberal arts education in this sense is happiness, and this connection between education and

happiness is the foundation of any such education. But today's "liberal" approach to the liberal arts excludes this connection in principle by relegating metaphysical and theological inquiry to the realm of private belief and individual preference.

What sort of content – what meaningful stories and symbols and corresponding practices and habits – is necessary to animate and contextualize the acquisition of these arts? Truth U's curricula are often simply too spare, too shorn of a transcendent or religious sense of the human person to provide the meaningful context for the disciplinary pursuit of truth. Truth U models all the liberal arts according to the successful techniques of the sciences and exudes a fixation with truth as a kind of methodological rigor – a case in which the natural sciences are masters and social sciences expert imitators, but which punts on fundamental questions of morality and religion that could guide the overall direction of inquiry.⁵

Truth in a purely objective, universal, or rational sense is too bare a telos for the liberal arts to sustain themselves. Rather, they thrive in narrative webs of meaning – of words and images that come freighted with sense and value and hold capacity for shaping worldviews and affections. Christians living in late antiquity saw that part of the task of the Christian educator would be the challenge of migrating the liberal arts tools from their classical Greco-Roman context to a biblical one – which included an exotic new set of stories, characters, ideals, values, images, and emotions – in order to create a Christian culture of liberal education.

Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430) sensed the conflict between the classical and biblical texts and worked tirelessly to identify the resonance and dissonance among them.⁶ Augustine was keen to highlight the common human inheritance of the liberal arts and the inherent dependence of these tools on the world of textual meaning in which they can be acquired and on which they can be practiced. In Augustine's view the classical world comes into direct conflict with the biblical world, and the liberal arts are repurposed in service of the new. He baptized the narrative world of classical culture and embedded it in an alternative story in pursuit of a different god.⁷ Slowly the old myths and gods were burned away. Centuries later, as the Enlightenment gave birth to a new vision of liberal arts education in modernity, it returned the favor and slowly banished metaphysics and Christian theology from the list of properly scientific disciplines.

The liberal model of liberal arts education admirably retains the central vision of these arts as the common tools of intellectual agility necessary for an intelligent, free, self-governing society, but it fails to provide a guiding web of shared meaning. It appears impotent to resist the common and reductive vision of education, and of the human person, as defined narrowly by work or material success. It appears unable to gather culture and sustain moral energy around the liberal notion of scientific "truth" as a sacred value. This leaves the students of Truth U vulnerable to a flattened existence, vacillating between materialistic meaninglessness or relativistic consumption of meaning. Truth U's best bet for regaining this energy would be to return to

the classical paganism or Christian theology of predecessor models of liberal education, in which the telos of truth is embedded in a more robust world of meaning.

Social Justice U, or the Progressive Liberal Arts

The progressive model of the liberal arts is statistically the most dominant today. The movement of radical 1960s intellectual life into the mainstream of higher education through professional research in the humanities and social sciences over the past half-century is an intriguing and complex historical and sociological tale. One simple way to understand Social Justice U's intellectual framework, however, is as an uneasy alliance between the deconstructive criticism of Friedrich Nietzsche and the Marxist insistence on equality.

Social Justice U's advantage over Truth U is that this uneasy alliance has created a captivating web of meaning in which the tools of the liberal arts can be acquired and tested in social criticism and activism. The critical Nietzschean insight of Social Justice U is the deconstruction of the telos of "truth" in the modern liberal university – critiquing the way "truth" has functioned as a "mobile army of metaphors," a coded expression of the will to dominate others, rooted in privilege, exclusion, and elitism.⁸ The irony, however, is that Nietzsche's shrewd analysis of power is rooted in pure historicism and relativism – a rejection of any metaphysical foundation for one's understanding of reality. This leaves one teetering on the brink of nihilism. Recognition of truth as nothing more than expressions of the will to power

in the form of education, for Nietzsche, was not cause for lamentation but rather cause for celebrating the naturalness and inevitability of such dominance.

This deconstructive project of unmasking the will to power is then yoked with a secularized version of the Christian instinct for social justice. Social Justice U provides an education in which one is unable to decide between Martin Luther King Jr.'s beloved community or the armed resistance of Malcolm X and the Black Panthers. This choice perfectly highlights the trouble with critiques of power and social injustice without a larger moral framework and imagination to guide the work of education.

This fusion of Nietzschean deconstruction and Marxist transformation could be understood as post-Christian. A latent Christian pathos still provides the necessary moral energy to motivate academic labor despite the loss of a broader web of narrative meaning to make sense of the practice of liberal arts education. The inner logic of unmasking power and defending the victim becomes a totalizing narrative; it is an alternative system of moral authority with unlimited resources for motivation and practice. It is therefore much more suited to replace the medieval and early modern Christian liberal arts university than Truth U.

The success of the moral energy of Social Justice U is rooted in its insistence on the inherent connection between intellectual work and social concern – an evolution of the Christian perspective on the liberal arts that yokes the intellectual and practical goals of education together under the twin commandments of love for God and love for neighbor. In this vision, the professionalization of undergraduate

education allows one to make change in the world through practical application. The progressive approach retains the Christian insistence on neighbor-love, even when it rejects the undergirding redemptive vision Christianity offers.

The Christian University as a Viable Alternative

Only by recovering a broader conception of the human person and the way education plays a role in forming such a person can the liberal arts move beyond the impasse between Truth U and Social Justice U. Neither telos – truth or justice – is coherent apart from this broader conception. The Augustinian Christian tradition (at the root of both the medieval Catholic and early modern Protestant vision of the liberal arts) represents one such anthropology and consensus about the web of content in which the tools of the liberal arts gain their coherence and on which they are to be practiced. Of course, there are many Christian traditions and other religious traditions (Jewish, Islamic, and Mormon, for example) in which the big story and anthropology work differently. The commonality of these forms of inquiry shaped by a religious tradition is that they are premised on a picture of a human being (anthropology) and an authoritative set of religious texts read in relation to, and in tension with, the tradition of the liberal arts – in both their ancient origins and modern disciplinary extensions.

The modern secular university's commitment to quantitative methods and techniques of empirical analysis as the highest form of inquiry makes it impossible to rationally

justify any non-empirically verified telos whatsoever, whether truth or social justice, for an institution or an individual. The most that can be said is that such teloi are historically dominant and the choice of one over the other is a matter of preference. The Christian university must convincingly reconceive its own work of liberal arts education in light of its own anthropology and the unfolding dialogue between its authoritative texts and the rival or competing texts of the Western liberal arts tradition and other religious or moral traditions. The liberal arts educator in this setting has a double role – both preserving a particular religious framework and engaging rival standpoints to see what’s wrong with them and to test one’s own tradition.⁹ The Christian university can proceed methodologically by what Alasdair MacIntyre calls a “tradition-shaped” form of inquiry, whereby one’s own religious perspective is sharpened by liberal arts education and brought into meaningful dialogue and conflict with rival answers to the deepest human questions.

The telos of Jesus U is love. Here the love of learning is tethered to love for God, love for neighbor, and a healthy self-love. Here is a vision of education that eclipses any purely material view of human personality. The social-science caricature of the human person found in both Truth U and Social Justice U amounts to a reduction of human desire to either bare economic self-interest or raw social power. Neither gets to the true depth of human personality. Each appeals to the language of psychology (whether as trauma or happiness) at key moments to get out of the flattened secular horizon and move into the realm of

true meaning. Although the social sciences are supposedly methodologically immune to value judgments, they slide into them through the quantitative language of material well-being. This leaves the student hostage to the contested visions of selfhood and identity on offer in the digital coliseum and marketplace. In the Christian vision, self-love is not reducible to economic self-interest or social dominance but recognized as the divine impulse through which one matures and meets the world not as one's oyster but as one's neighbors. The ember of self-love fuels an outward-driving process of moral formation. This view is not reducible to social competition or cooperation but presumes a depth and purpose for liberal education that always exceeds the sum of its parts.

In the Christian university, then, liberal education is brought toward a transcendent horizon that exceeds any purely secular view of political society. Here, citizenship is twofold: One part is committed to the proximate justice and common interest of whatever earthly political situation one finds oneself in. Such political situations are judged from the perspective of the Christian conception of the human person as dignified bearer of the divine image. Justice depends upon a political society's ability to institutionally sustain recognition of this dignity. The other part of citizenship longs for a deeper, truer form of community found in that "eternal city" foreshadowed in the civic images of the Psalms, the Book of Hebrews, and Revelation. Liberal arts education is inherently linked to the formation of new citizens, and thus Christian education imbues citizens with a shrewd sensitivity to the limits

of politics. Christians ought to be fiercely loyal to local forms of community *and* fiercely global in outlook, given the history and mission of the church. This produces a kind of spiritual restlessness that resists the temptations of nationalism and goes on pilgrimage.

What would it look like to build a liberal arts institution oriented toward this telos today? It would require a collaborative multidisciplinary team of faculty to work out a new-yet-old vision of truth, and a corresponding epistemological framework that moves beyond the fragmentation of knowledge found in the modern university. It would need to order its community's life around the habits and practices necessary to sustain the marriage of learning and love for God and neighbor. It would need to nurture the character traits – intellectual, moral, and spiritual – most conducive to authentic liberal education. It would need sensitivity to the form and atmosphere of the campus, and creativity in bringing it into harmony with the intellectual and moral aims of the community. Questions about online learning and career preparation might press upon us. But such questions should not distract from more basic ones. We should be encouraged that educational endeavors in the Christian liberal arts tradition have emerged and succeeded in much less auspicious times than our own.