

THE DEATH OF THE SOUL

STUDIA PHILOSOPHICA

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The Death of the Soul

Critical Essays on the University

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for Linda Martin

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“Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about. All democrats object to men being disqualified by the accident of birth; tradition objects to their being disqualified by the accident of death. Democracy tells us not to neglect a good man’s opinion, even if he is our groom; tradition asks us not to neglect a good man’s opinion, even if he is our father. I, at any rate, cannot separate the two ideas of democracy and tradition; it seems evident to me that they are the same idea. We will have the dead at our councils. The ancient Greeks voted by stones; these shall vote by tombstones. It is all quite regular and official, for most tombstones, like most ballot papers, are marked with a cross.”

— G. K. Chesterton

Introduction

The following is a selection of essays from a dissenting campus newsletter entitled *The Examined Life*, which I have been publishing for over twenty-six years at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, a state university in the heartland of America. Beginning in 1988, I set about examining my university, which was then a state college, by scrutinizing our mission statement, course offerings, Faculty Senate, affirmative-action hiring criteria guideline, push for diversity, Chancellor's correspondence, campus architecture, athletics, political correctness, entrance requirements, as well as any one of the plethora of campus missives and announcements clogging my email daily. This journal was sent to the faculty, administrators, regents, governor and several hundred additional off-campus readers. Working from Socrates' injunction that the unexamined life is not worth living, I found that the unexamined university is also worthless.

These pages are my attempt to be mindful about the place in which I have been placed as a philosopher. While this may be similar to Socrates' being attached to Athens to keep the statesmen, poets, philosophers and citizens from falling asleep in the care of their souls' need for the truth, I am no Socrates. I do not, however, think it an accident that I landed here in 1986. After applying to 125 colleges and universities for an entry-level professorship of philosophy for a year and a half, I was hired to develop a philosophy program at a state college hoping to become a university. I had no experience other than the preparation

that comes with completing a doctorate in philosophy at the University of Missouri while living on a forty-seven-acre farm with my wife Linda and three of our four children, Zachary, Seth and Katherine—Rachel arrived in Nebraska. While applying for a position, I had been working on a neighbor's farm feeding greyhounds, building fence, clearing brush, etc., which was a perfect fit, I thought, for qualifying me to establish a philosophy program (clearing brush with students). Coincidentally, what was then Kearney State College had previously been the state normal school where my father, aunt and uncle were the first of their family to graduate from college. A. O. Thomas Hall, where I have taught for thirty years, was originally the lab school where my father Robert taught for the Nebraska State Teachers College.

I teach philosophy as I was taught by Professor Dick Wood at Northern Arizona University, the old-fashioned way: by examining the ideas of one thinker at a time with students, who, like myself at their age, are not in the habit of thinking about much other than “Will I need a coat?” or “What is my boyfriend doing right now?” My Socratic endeavor, then, is to get students to think about ideas, for example, “Which is better, to suffer an injustice or to commit one?” and to understand that the ideas of their intellectual ancestors have consequences that affect their lives. One of the first facts about learning to think is obvious: only a person can think. Corporations, government agencies, committees, universities, etc., cannot think, not because they do not have brains but because they have no souls, no minds by which to see. What holds for the whole necessarily holds for the part. Man is *capax Dei*, a living soul made in the image of God. He is made to know.

Plato's “Allegory of the Cave” is the ancient form of what currently passes for education, for instructing the young. Imagine a cave where people are chained to a wall by their arms so that their heads can only look forward at a flat wall upon which shadows are cast by men who are standing behind those chained beings on a parapet before a fire and holding up cut-out images of objects found outside the cave.

These prisoners have been here since childhood at the mercy of those in a position of authority over what they can view. The people on the parapet are teachers, ministers, government officials, newscasters who control the visions of the cave dwellers. To pass the time of day, those chained to the wall have contests to see who can remember the order of images passing before them and award praises to those who do so.

This is the picture of the lecture format of learning in which a subject matter is distilled into a textbook administered by a person who is no more than a talking textbook. Imagine a student with a large funnel placed in hole drilled into the top of the head so that information can be poured into the funnel. Then imagine a continually dripping faucet spouting forth from the student's mouth. At the end of the week, when the faucet is opened, out pours the information, which is shortly to be forgotten—thus, the leaky faucet.

Little can or will change until the person chained to the screen starts to think for himself and to understand what it is to have a soul, a mind moved by principle. The *Republic* is founded on the principle that one ought not return a harm with a harm. Socrates is the soul of an education which releases each student from the mundane realm of his view, his opinion, by questioning what he assumes to be reality.

My introduction to philosophy, which began in wonder forty-four years ago, shows what it is to be troubled by ideas. During my sophomore year at Northern Arizona University, I took the philosophy course “Man and Reality,” taught by Dr. Richard Wood. Twenty-five of us were seated in the classroom when in walked this man with his hair slicked back, wearing brown jeans, a western shirt, a bolo and cowboy boots. He stopped and stood eyeing the class. While twitching the corner of his mouth and straightening out his mustache with his forefinger and thumb; he frowned and looked about as though he were searching for something to say. He took a puff on his half-smoked cigar and began to read the roll.

After reading a few names, he suddenly stopped and asked a student sitting in the front row, “Do you have a mind?”

“Yes,” the student responded.

“Well, then you will like this course and reading Descartes’ *Meditations* because he also has a mind about which he is going to tell us. Do you have anything in your mind?”

“I have lots of things in my mind.”

“That’s nice, but could you give me an example of one thing you have in your mind?”

“Well, currently I have you, Professor Wood, in my mind.”

“I am in your mind?”

“Well it is not really you that is in my mind, but an image of you which has come through my eyes to my mind.”

“An image of me has come through your eyes and is in your mind?”

“Exactly!”

“So do you see me or do you see an image of me?”

“I see an image of you.”

“Have you ever seen me?”

“No, I have only seen an image of you?”

“Then how do you know that it is me if you have only seen an image of me?”

“I don’t.”

“Then to whom are you speaking?”

No response.

I went home very confused—Who was this cowboy? This was the first time in my life I had been confused in school to the point of thinking and rethinking the discussion. How could it be that I could not see what was right before my eyes? Man has a soul, a mind, the ability to think by nature, but he does not think by nature any more than he speaks by nature, though he has the potential to speak. It depends on his formation. Just as speaking takes practice and the good fortune of a home with literate parents, quality teachers and the will to learn are necessary for thought.

His questions forced me to use my mind and, by so doing, to develop the mind needed to wrestle with Descartes’ solipsistic idea

of how the mind works. Eventually, I saw Descartes' confusions were brought about by the misuse of ordinary, everyday words.

This was the start of the adventure which follows after being freed from the cave of information into the light of the formation of my mind. By studying the ideas of Plato, Descartes, Berkeley, Hume, Wittgenstein, Dostoyevsky, Camus, etc., I learned to think and be responsible for my life and was grounded by "you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free."

The foundations of my university, which was a state college several years ago, are much older than this university herself. The word "university," for example, houses an idea that comes from the Latin *universum*, which in turn grew from the neuter of *universus*, the base from which the word "universe" evolved, meaning the whole body of things and phenomena observed or postulated. Similar in meaning is the word "cosmos," a systemic whole created and maintained by the direct intervention of divine power.

The focus of the university rests on the first sentence of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, "All men by nature desire to know." This is obvious, Aristotle noted, because of the delight we take in our senses, especially the sense of sight, in that we are able to see the difference between things. This is sensible. Aristotle elucidates the directive principle of the university in the first sentence of *Nicomachean Ethics* when he states "Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim."¹

The university was founded in the Middle Ages, when God still was creator and continued to maintain the universe. All the students and faculty were members of the same body on their pilgrimage through the world. A common inscription over a scriptorium or monastic library *Tota Bibliotheca unus liberest, in capite velatus, in fine*

1. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1999), 1094a, 1-3.

manifestus (The whole Library is one book, in the beginning veiled, in the end manifest) succinctly summarizes this.

Man has two eyes. He has an external eye, which looks out on the world of chronological events streaming right before him. This is the quantifiable eye, the scientific eye, which measures everything by size, shape, color, speed and quantity. The second eye is the internal eye, the qualitative eye, the eye of the heart looking deep down into the soul throughout time. This is the eye of memory and self-examination which is anchored by a conscience and the moral judgment necessary to distinguish between what is just and unjust, good and evil, smoke and mirrors.

The external eye can be taught to see and describe what is right before it, and its medium is the natural sciences. The internal eye looks back in time through the lens of history, literature, philosophy, art, scripture, etc., to learn the necessary art of being. This eye requires learning moral principles to guide the soul between good and evil, the just and unjust. And while science builds upon itself, every man is born internally ignorant and must start from scratch in finding his purpose in the world.

Deprive a student of either one of his eyes and you have a Cyclops with the myopic vision that makes for a narrow mind. He will be all head and no heart or all heart and no head. The former leads to heartless abstraction and the latter leads to mindless compassion.

In all of this, it is important to remember that a university is not housed in its buildings. A university is housed in the minds of her faculty and students who can see only as far as they can read. It is necessary to have both eyes wide open in search of not merely the cutting edge of the present, but also those permanent ideas gained through understanding in the study of the Humanities.

The modern university is but a smattering of what she once was. Though universities were founded to sustain faith by reason and to maintain order in the soul, they have fallen to being secular rather than universal, aimlessly offering, at best, a servile education based on the

technique and procedural knowledge necessary to present and/or perform a service. From kitchen and bathroom design to neuro-surgery, from accounting to industrial distribution, from music therapy to elementary math, education no longer provides students with the whole picture. Faith is not in the province of the mundane and the need for order in a man's soul has been forgotten or denied. Remember, "university" comes from the Latin *universitas* which means "the whole." However, in this age, "university" is applied loosely as they have sunk further and further into the provinciality of place and time. Along with advancing the ordered knowledge of the sciences and history, a university which fails to offer her students the literature and philosophy of her intellectual ancestors leaves her students blinded in the world. Without any introduction to a higher sense of purpose in their lives, computer scientists, accountants, teachers, graphic artists, counselors, lawyers, physicians, and the like, are left grounded at the lowest level of existence to scratch out a life. We are a prudent, practically-minded people, interested in attaching ourselves to the means of making a living, but not in addressing the ends of living.