

*John Henry Newman on Universities*

by

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In the following paper, three things will be done. First, John Henry Newman's argument for the purpose of a university as seen in *Idea of a University* will be laid out. Second, Newman's argument against the universities of his time will be explained. Third, how his argument applies to contemporary universities will be discussed.

Yet, before addressing these three areas, two things must first be understood. First, it is necessary to understand how he views the universe. Second, it is necessary to see what Newman takes a subject to be. By the word subject is meant an area of study such as might be studied in any school, such as mathematics, literature, or history; Newman's view goes beyond this.

John Henry Newman views the universe as a whole. By universe is meant everything that exists—from the remotest stars, planets, and vacuums full of stardust to the oak trees and squirrels in someone's back yard, to the microorganisms in a glass of water, to the fundamental particles that make up matter.

By whole two things are meant. First, that the diverse parts that make up the universe are put together with a particular order. This means two things. First, this means that the things that exist in the universe do not exist in isolation. Planets do not just exist by themselves. Rather they exist in the context of space, of other planets, of stardust, and indeed, also oak trees, squirrels, and bacteria. Second, since they do not exist in isolation, the different things that exist in the

universe affect each other. The mass of a star may affect the position of a planet, and the mass and position of that planet might affect the position of another planet. This aspect of being a whole can be understood by analogy to the parts of a human body. The diverse parts that make up the human body are put together with a particular order: they exist in the context of each other and affect each other. The legs are positioned in such a way so as to allow the human being to walk. What could be considered one of the most crucial parts of the human body, the brain, is protected by a bone skull. The hairs found on the inside of the nose keep dust and some potentially noxious particles from entering the respiratory system. Likewise, John Henry Newman holds, the parts of the universe are organized purposes in them. Water and soil help the plant grow. The fruits of plants are food for several animals. Several animals are food for human beings.

The second thing that is meant by whole is that the universe, because it is a whole organized in a very particular way, cannot be understood as a whole. That is, it is not possible to look at the universe as one thing and understand everything that thing means, as one might be able to read the second person singular present active indicative of the verb to run—you run—and understand everything that is denoted by it. Rather, in order to begin to understand the universe, two things must be done. First, it is necessary to look at the different individual parts that make up the universe; it is necessary to abstract the different parts from the whole. That is, it is necessary to look at the stars as such, to look at planets as such, to look at squirrels, human beings, and bacteria as such. Second, it is necessary to see how these different parts of the universe bear upon each other. It is necessary to look at how galaxies might relate to planets, how these two might affect squirrels, bacteria or human beings. This is necessary precisely because, as stated

above, the different parts of the universe are not isolated things that happen to exist together, rather, they affect each other and they are organized in a very particular way.

In the context of Newman's idea of the universe as defined above, his view of a subject can be understood. As stated above, two things must be done in order to understand the universe: abstracting parts from the whole on the one hand and seeing how these parts relate to each other on the other hand. For Newman, subjects are the systematic study which allow us to understand the universe. Since they allow us to understand the universe, the two things mentioned above must also be true of subjects. First then, subjects must abstract parts of the whole that makes up the universe; a subject will be that which, for the purposes of study, abstracts parts of the whole and defines its subject matter in terms of these parts. The subject that abstracts the part of the universe that concerns galaxies, stars, and planets might fall under astronomy; astronomy defines its subject matter in terms of celestial objects. The subject that abstracts the part of the universe that concerns squirrels and bacteria might fall under biology; biology defines its subject matter in terms of living organisms. The subject that abstracts the part of the universe that concerns fundamental particles might fall under physics; physics defines its subject matter in terms of fundamental particles.

Thus, of any subject two questions may be asked. First, it is possible to ask what particular part of the whole of the universe the subject studies. Second, it is possible to ask what the boundaries are between itself and other subjects. While the subject matter of biology is living beings, it is outside of the boundaries of biology to study the fundamental particles that make up living beings. This question about the boundaries of a given discipline points to the second idea inherent in a discipline: in order to truly understand any given discipline, it is necessary to see how this discipline relates to other disciplines.

If these two things concerning disciplines are not accomplished, if either several of them are not studied or the bearing of these disciplines upon each other is not considered, the understanding of the universe that will follow will be defective in one or both of two ways. First, it will be deficient insofar as it lacks the information of the discipline in question. An understanding of the universe that does not explain the chemical processes that occur in biological organisms is ultimately deficient insofar as it lacks this particular set of information. The same can be said of the information that is provided by any of the other disciplines, whether that information be philosophical, mathematical, historical, or of any other kind.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, not only will a set of information be lacking, but other disciplines will attempt to provide the information that is lacking. That is, one or more disciplines will not respect the boundaries that are proper to it and will infringe upon the boundaries of another discipline. To illustrate this, Newman considers the hypothetical situation of a university that completely omits the study of and any reference to the subject of psychology. What follows from this, he claims, is that the university will ignore any effect the human mind might have in the material world. Instead, only material causes will be considered. If this is the case, Newman claims that things such as the intricate architecture of homes, with their walls, rooms, chimneys and the like, would have to be considered the result of physical and material laws, and nothing else. It would be because of the laws of physics that any given house exists as it does. This, of course, is obviously false, as it fails to consider the human mind that designs the house and decides to construct it. Yet, because of the omission of the discipline of psychology, not only is the information of this subject omitted, but more importantly, another subject—in this case physics—comes to take the place of that other discipline. In this example what was before explained by the human mind comes to be explained by the laws of physics.

One final thing must be said about the universe and subjects before proceeding. Newman states that several subjects and the relationship between them must be studied in order to understand the universe. Yet, one does not gain an understanding of the universe instantaneously and completely by fulfilling the above conditions. The expanse of knowledge is so vast that one could never study all possible disciplines, let alone the relationship between them. As a result, the understanding of the universe is something that one can work towards, get closer to, but never achieve perfectly.

Having understood what John Henry Newman means by the universe and subjects, it is now possible to see what he says about universities as such. Of what he says about universities as such, two things will here be explained. First will be what he believes is the purpose of universities. Second is how he believes that purpose is achieved.

The purpose of the university, John Henry Newman claims, is the perfection of the mind. Newman's idea of perfection is an Aristotelian concept, by which two things are meant. First, saying that anything has a perfection is to say that it has a specific function. Second, the perfection of any given thing is to perform that function well. It is for this reason that Newman says that the perfection of a body is health. It could be said that the function of the human body is to perform all the biological processes that allow it to remain alive. Then, the perfection of the human body would be not only to perform these biological processes, but to perform them well, which would be health. Newman claims that the specific function of the mind is understanding, or reasoning. Thus, the perfection of the mind is understanding done well. The purpose of the university is to make the mind understand well; in Newman's eyes, the university succeeds or fails insofar as it achieves or fails to achieve this.

Having stated that Newman considers the purpose of the university to make the mind perform understanding well, what Newman means by understanding done well will be stated. In order to do this it is necessary to first state what the object of understanding is. All things that are capable of being known are potential objects of understanding. From fundamental particles, galaxies, stars, and planets, to squirrels, oak trees, and bacteria. In other words, everything in the universe is a potential object of understanding, or put more simply, the universe itself is the mind's object of understanding. Yet, as stated above, two things are necessary if the universe is to be understood: several parts of the whole need to be abstracted and studied, and what the relationship of the parts to each other needs to be understood. Further, the way in which this is done is by the one the one hand studying several disciplines, and on the other hand seeing how the different disciplines relate to each other. Only if this is done will the mind be able to achieve its perfection, which is understanding done well.

Examples of the subjects John Henry Newman claims help the mind achieve its perfection when studied together are: physics, biology, literature, history, chemistry, and astronomy. Three or four subjects studied to a significant degree are what he has in mind. Yet, Newman claims there is one subject that serves as the unifying subject: there is one subject that connects all the other subjects. This subject is theology. In order to speak to why theology is the unifying discipline, it is necessary to look more deeply into the order of the universe.

Two aspects of the universe are relevant here. First, it is taken for granted that the universe is a whole. It is taken for granted that the same physical laws hold in every part of the universe. When inferences are made about what is happening in remote galaxies, these inferences presuppose that every part of the universe is governed by the same laws and is intelligible in the same way. In fact, it becomes tremendously difficult—not to say impossible—to make a

systematic inquiry without presupposing that the universe is a whole. Second, some kind of explanation must be given to account for this unity; two kinds will be considered here briefly. First, it could be said that the wholeness of the universe is a matter of brute fact; it could be said that it is just the case that the universe is a whole and that there is no further explanation behind this. If this is the case though, there seems to be no good reason to suppose that this order holds for every part of the universe. Yet this order is presupposed in nearly every scientific inquiry—not to say all scientific inquiry. Second, it could be said that there is a power outside of the universe that is responsible for this order. If it were a power inside of the universe, it too would have to be explained in terms of other things in the universe. Yet, since this power would be outside of the universe it needs no further explanation and can serve as the source of explanation of the unity of the universe. This is the view Newman takes, and he takes this power to be the Christian God. In fact Newman would claim that this and only this is the proper way to account for the order of the universe; any other attempt at explaining this order he would see as flawed. That is not to say, of course, that there are no other arguments that can be made to account for the order of the universe. That being said, Newman's account does provide an explanation of that order that allows one to presuppose that same order in all parts of the universe, something that the brute fact argument does not seem to do at first sight, if at all.

Thus, in Newman's view of the universe the Christian God provides an explanation that allows one to presuppose an order of the universe that applies everywhere. Theology is the subject that speaks about the Christian God. It is necessary to state that Newman's view of the academic study of theology is that of a subject that concerns facts that are objectively true and can be known, as opposed to mere opinions or sentiment. How and why this is the case could be discussed in more detail, but that discussion will not be pursued here. Without this subject,

Newman claims, it is impossible to achieve the perfection of the mind. His reasoning is as follows. Studying the different subjects and how they relate to each other is necessary for the perfection of the mind, as stated above. Yet, relating these disciplines presupposes an order to the universe that applies everywhere, for in the view of the universe explained above the subjects are abstractions of different parts of the universe for the purpose of study. Newman claims that this order can be accounted for only by the existence of God. Theology is the subject that speaks about this God. Therefore, if one omits theology, one cannot account for an order to the universe that applies everywhere. If one cannot account for an order of the universe that applies everywhere, it is not possible to relate any discipline to any other discipline, for this would presuppose the order of the universe as a whole. If it is not possible to relate the disciplines to each other, it is not possible to achieve the perfection of the mind. Therefore, if theology is omitted, the perfection of the mind as Newman spells it out is impossible to achieve.

Having understood what the purpose of universities is in John Henry Newman's eyes, and that achieving this purpose is only possible if several subjects and the relationship between them is understood on the one hand, and that one of these subjects of necessity must be theology on the other hand, this allows one to see what he would say about secular universities of his day as universities. Since theology is a necessary condition for achieving the perfection of the mind, and since secular universities by definition do not study theology, Newman would say that secular universities cannot achieve the perfection of the mind.

If the secular university does not achieve the perfection of the mind, Newman claims some combination of the following two things can happen. Either the mind will achieve only a narrow understanding, or the mind will achieve only a superficial understanding, or both. First, narrowness of mind is that which occurs to the student who has received a specialized education

focusing on only one or a few subjects. Two things happen to the mind of the person in consequence. First, the mind becomes fitted to make judgments about the subject it received specialized training in. Second and in contrast, the same mind becomes utterly inadequate in making judgments about other disciplines.

Second, superficial understanding is that which occurs to the student who, while studying several disciplines, fails to study them in two ways to a significant degree. First, the student does not study different disciplines to a significant enough degree; the student's study of the disciplines is therefore superficial. Second, the student does not make the appropriate connections between the different disciplines. Yet it must be stated that as many disciplines a student may study, as rigorously as the student may study them, and as many connections as he might make between them, his understanding will ultimately be flawed if he fails to study theology. What is more, not only will it be flawed, but it will be flawed in a key way, for Newman claims God is the source of unity in the universe.

All this having been said about John Henry Newman's view of university education, whether or not his view applies to the contemporary secular university will now be addressed. It will be argued here that John Henry Newman's critique of the secular universities of his day does indeed apply to the contemporary secular university. At the outset, it would seem that the contemporary secular university and Newman's ideal university are simply two different kinds of things meant to accomplish two different kinds of goals. As discussed in detail above, the purpose of John Henry Newman's ideal university is the perfection of the mind that is accomplished first through the study of several disciplines, one of which must be theology, second through seeing what bearing these disciplines have on each other. On the other hand it would seem that the contemporary secular university is concerned with two key things. First, it is concerned with

human knowledge: increasing it through research, passing it on through teaching, and teaching students how to learn. Second, the contemporary secular university is concerned with providing a labor force for modern society. Yet if John Henry Newman's views about the perfection of the mind and how it is to be achieved are correct, it would seem that the contemporary university fails—to some degree at least—in accomplishing the goals as outlined above. Concerning the increment in human knowledge, it would seem that the conclusions drawn within the contemporary university might suffer in two different but very closely related ways in virtue of their happening at a place that does not strive for what Newman considers the perfection of the mind. First, the conclusion itself might be flawed, as it might come from the application of already existing pieces of knowledge into areas outside their boundary. This is seen in the example of omitting psychology cited above. The laws of physics are already existing pieces of information that, due to the exclusion of a discipline, are applied to areas outside their boundary, resulting in the flawed conclusion that architectural structures can be explained by considering only the laws of physics and nothing else. Second, while a conclusion drawn might be correct and indeed a genuine discovery, this conclusion might be applied to areas outside the boundary of the subject in which it was discovered. For example, physicist Stephen Hawking, in his popular book *A Brief History of Time*, explains his theory that gives good evidence for the conclusion that the universe had no beginning and has existed eternally. Arguing whether or not this thesis is correct is outside of the scope of the present argument. Yet, assuming his research points to a genuine discovery, assuming that the eternity of the world is a genuine discovery, he very quickly assumes this means there cannot be a creating God; he is trespassing the boundaries of physics and drawing erroneous conclusions from theology. Showing how this is the case is also outside of the scope of the present argument.

Concerning teaching students how to learn, it must be said that to see how Newman's critique would apply in this area would require a further discussion of two things: first, what the nature of learning is, and second what constitutes good learning as opposed to less than successful or flawed learning. This discussion will not be pursued here. That being said, given what has been said about incrementing and passing on knowledge, and given that learning of necessity involves some degree of understanding, which John Henry Newman claims is the specific function of the mind, it would not be beyond imagination that his critique would apply in this area as well.

Finally, concerning the provision of a workforce for society, Newman in some way addresses this question directly when he speaks about the practical use of the education he's outlining. While he states that in a sense the purpose of the education he has in mind—the perfection of the mind—is an end in itself, he does assert that this end shows itself to be useful. The perfected mind will develop a capacity for judgment, it will be able to think about the same subject-matter in different ways, weighing different aspects of any thing in question. This capacity for judgment, Newman claims, prepares the student to engage in any profession. On the other hand, Newman affirms that though a specialized education may in a certain sense prepare a student for a particular profession, the narrowness of mind that ensues from this specialized education makes the student inadequate for the practice of that profession insofar as this specialization neglects the proper development of judgment. He will claim that the practice of any profession requires judgment, which is not developed through a specialized education. If the above is correct, then the contemporary secular university also fails to some degree in providing an adequate labor force for society. It must be said though, that all these claims against the contemporary university hold true if and only if two things are the case. First, this only holds if

Newman's view of what the universe is as a whole, as explained above, is the case. Further, Newman's view about the perfection of the mind and how it is to be achieved must be the case. If either or both of these claims are not the case, then the argument does not hold. Whether or not these two claims hold against possible arguments against them will not be here addressed.