University Education as Trojan Horse for the Common Good

Charlotte Joy Martin, Ph.D.¹

Abstract

Newman’s *Idea* builds his understanding of education upon his insight into the mind’s essential nature. The mind knows by continually adapting many partial notions through going round, comparing, combining, mutually correcting. Thus knowledge of an increasingly particular kind, the knowledge so highly valued in today’s hiring marketplace, ends up more and more ceasing to be knowledge. Liberal education should dominate even in the preparation of students for specialized professions because it respects the intellect’s many operations that go into gathering partial notions into mutually correcting patterns of truthful knowledge. As the excellence of the mind such education is a good in itself, and at the same time its humanizing influence also forms the intellect for its best engagement in social and political life, and so disposes the liberally educated graduate with this or that specialty a “Trojan Horse” to resist dehumanizing patterns in the workplace and its societal contexts.

John Henry Newman’s *Idea* of University contains vital ingredients for a critique of dehumanizing social impulses and their corrupting influence upon higher education. The *Idea* also offers a recipe for contemporary resistance. While religious inspiration may energize universities for criticizing long-dominant social and economic forces and urging alternative practices, especially compared to schools directed by a state or even more by a profit motive, the resistance that Newman’s classic suggests involves recognizing a humanistic duty. It is the resistance of educating in a way that consistently honors the peculiar dignity of the human intellect and that in the process unleashes the inevitable social benefits which shadow such an educated mind.

Cardinal Newman wrote about university education a hundred and sixty years ago. But his account of human ways of knowing rings true today, and he builds upon it his critique of universities that fall captive to the predilection for specialized knowledge. For the good of persons and society alike, educating should harmonize with human ways of knowing and not worship at the specialization altar even in forming professionals who can carry out specialized professional duties. Thus in asserting boldly Newman’s relevance for resisting current anti-human forces, one need only pay attention to his argument. Paying attention will involve exploring his account of knowing and of the educating that honors the character of human knowing, and it will take us through his views about society’s demand for specialized professionals. It will include as well the reasons that liberal knowledge, which is what he calls a university’s proper, determinative aim even for teaching a specialty, is not only good in itself but also constitutes “the best and highest formation of the intellect for social and political life,” what my title designated ‘the common good.’¹

Skeptics about the language of social critique and resistance in my thesis might chew for now on a particularly pregnant passage from the *Idea* itself. Here Newman depicts the education dominated by too much specialization as making for ignorance dressed up as knowledge, even while he admits that specialized arts sustain our lives. Is there not a self-inflicted madness here that Newman is determined to expose and resist in commentary such as these lines?

¹Mount Mercy University, Professor of Religious Studies, 1330 Elmhurst Dr. NE, Cedar Rapids, IA 52402. 319-363-8213, chmartin@mtmercy.edu
Here are two methods of Education; ... the one rises towards general ideas, the other is exhausted upon what is particular and external. Let me not be thought to deny the necessity, or to decry the benefit, of such attention to what is particular and practical, as belongs to the useful or mechanical arts; life could not go on without them. ... I only say that Knowledge, in proportion as it tends more and more to be particular, ceases to be Knowledge.

Genuine knowledge, a core human good, must be delivered from the method of education that is “exhausted upon” specialized, practical concerns and from the societal voices that esteem no other learning. Competence with such life-sustaining particular concerns must instead be taught and learned in ways freed from such dehumanizing outcomes.

I. Newman’s account of knowing

In the Idea Newman describes knowledge as a dynamic phenomenon, and his judgments as to a university’s proper activities consistently reflect his account of knowledge. He describes both the character of the operations through which one ascends toward coming to know and the character of the operations which result when one has attained that summit. Of the former he writes, “[w]e know, ... not at a glance, but, as it were, by piecemeal and accumulation, by a mental process, by going round an object, by the comparison, the combination, the mutual correction, the continual adaptation, of many partial notions, by the ... joint action of many faculties and exercises of mind.” These operations of going round, comparing, combining, mutually correcting, and continually adapting many partial notions are the work of knowing.

Then in their wake, because of their own tenor, occurs the intellectual grasp of sense objects, the taking of a view of them, the reasoning upon what it sees that “invests it with an idea,” the determination to see anything in relation to the larger whole of which it is but a part, to unearth its beginning and anticipate its end, indeed, to “communicate the image of the whole to every separate portion, till that whole becomes in imagination like a spirit, everywhere pervading and penetrating its component parts, and giving them one definite meaning.” Thoroughly knowing things in their interrelatedness thus affords “accounting for anomalies, answering objections, supplying deficiencies, making allowances for errors, and meeting emergencies.” Herein resides the dignity of knowledge: “Not to know the relative disposition of things is the state of slaves or children; to have mapped out the Universe is the boast, or at least the ambition, of Philosophy.”

The dignity of knowledge reflects its importance, and that of the intellect, within the human being, reflects the dignity inherent in the human person. For in acquiring knowledge we are “satisfying a direct need of our nature,” gaining something “valuable for what its very presence in us does for us after the manner of habit.” We are cultivating the intellect in relation to its proper object through the perfection of its powers. The intellect’s wondrous capacity for cultivation in knowing truth is integral to what brings a distinctively human quality to nearly everything that we do. When we devalue intellectual growth, we reduce the human person to a mere “individual (understood as an anonymous member of the group governed by pragmatic laws);” Newman forcefully resists this dangerous abstraction with his insistence that the human mind is so constituted as to make of any knowledge that truly is knowledge something which is “its own reward.”

Though too delicate to restrain pride and passion, the enlargement of mind that is such knowledge brings with it connatural qualities that include dispassionate thinking and courteous conduct. The education of the person is not about the facts one can recall but the formation one’s mind has had, recognizable in how one will “take up a certain stance when confronted with new experience.” Newman himself should be heard at some length here:

the intellect, which has been disciplined to the perfection of its powers, which knows, and thinks while it knows, which has learned to leaven the dense mass of facts and events with the elastic force of reason, such an intellect cannot be partial, cannot be exclusive, cannot be impetuous, cannot be at a loss, cannot be but patient, collected, and majestically calm, because it discerns the end in every beginning, the origin in every end. ... That perfection of the Intellect, which is the result of Education ... is almost prophetic from its knowledge of history; it is almost heart-searching from its knowledge of human nature; it has almost supernatural charity from its freedom from littleness and prejudice; it has almost the repose of faith, because nothing can startle it; it has almost the beauty and harmony of heavenly contemplation, so intimate is it with the eternal order of things and the music of the spheres.
Education aims in this direction; the university has these as its objects. Most importantly, Newman grounds this account of intellectual excellence in how human rationality appropriates the true and the good. For Newman how to educate, what happens when worthwhile education happens, what qualities attend success, can be worked out only as a reflection of the operations by which human rationality appropriates its object.

II. Human knowing and liberal education

One learns as much from how Newman demarcates the “liberal” character of liberal education. The presence of any end other than that of the perfecting of the intellect “diminishes ... [the] claim to the appellation ‘liberal,’ and that still more if they are cut down to the strict exigencies of that end.” That is, when the interests that dominate an educational activity are not merely different from but violate (‘cut’) the needs of the intellect’s own increasingly good operation, Newman deems it something to resist. Clearly, he does not mean that all “learned professions” necessarily depend on mind-constraining practices. But he does mean that what is problematic educationally is problematic by virtue of imposing some shrunken pursuit in place of intellectual activity that cultivates the intellect’s good.

And so when a university achieves no more for students than cultivating the intellect as intellect, Newman judges that it “has done its work.” Newman deems the university necessary for this work “because of the disparity between the oneness of the object of enquiry and the partial and parochial character of even the ... most comprehensive of the particular enquiries we undertake.” Newman’s kind of university is precisely where the need can be met for comparing and combining and correcting and adapting these partial enquiries, so that the mind comes to “perceive truth in the only way it can through various aspects of the whole.”

Alasdair MacIntyre contributes well-wrought illustrations of this process, this getting to truth through correcting inevitably flawed early impressions:

Sometimes we need to correct what economists tell us by appealing to the historians, and sometimes of course vice versa. Sometimes we need to correct what neurophysiologists tell us by appealing to psychologists, and sometimes vice versa, and sometimes we may need as well or instead to go to novelists or dramatists. ... To be educated is, on this view, not only to know how to bring each discipline to bear in appropriate ways, but also how to respond to the unjustified claims made in the name of each.

Thus universities need the sort of structures and ethos that can effectively privilege this process of comparing and combining and mutually completing or correcting that is the mind’s acquisition of genuine knowledge. Learning requires, as one Newman scholar puts it, “the pressure of disciplines upon each other;” only interdependently with each other do work of the disciplines and the working of our minds conspire for genuine knowing.

III. Specialized professionals

The converse of what Newman recognizes education to be is what he recognizes it not to be—his insight, needed still, into how counterproductive are the “cost-effective” short-cuts to more “useful” learning, the focus on one discipline only without complementary perspectives. While such study may well make one a better asset for wealth creating projects, it degrades one as a rational being, sacrificing the intellect and sucking out of knowledge the broader vista that makes it knowledge. Meanwhile then, those potentially complementary disciplines instead seem to each other only fiscal competitors within the “supermarket of career apprenticeships” managed by a dean or provost. That higher education should follow contours that make knowing an end in itself one commentator on Newman’s vision, a university president, openly scoffs at, as much as the whole machinery of manufacturing professional workers for the higher-end production-consumption processes in effect scoffs. Where is the profit in disciplines putting pressure on each other?

The university is valued today for how it helps us manipulate nature, generate wealth, and manufacture social consent. Reflecting consumerism and the subordination of being to having, universities face “pressure to turn out ... a body of skilled professionals rather than to satisfy the quest for truth and goodness,” failing to resist the view of the individual as mere instrument. Universities too forget the full scope of human nature that had guided Newman’s expectations of universities.
Professional disciplines, seeming to thrive as they wrest more time from liberal studies, do in fact “risk sacrificing their integrity” to unchecked drives for wealth and power; “they risk becoming crassly commodified.”xxx

Indeed the whole university may succeed at cost-effective career preparation and economic growth and yet fail at being a university.xxxi

Underlying that judgment, again, is Newman’s vision of the human mind’s way of building up knowledge. We come to possess genuine knowledge connection by connection, correction by correction. Knowledge needs the pressure of disciplines upon one another. What opens the door to the commodification of higher learning is the fragmentation of higher learning.xxxi Because it promotes fragmentation and not connection, highly specialized study makes for a mind deformed by qualities that clash with qualities of its own cultivated state.xxxiii

Knowledge that people have not thought through and thought out carries them away, Newman observes.xxxiv Is this not evident? Consider AlisdairMacIntyre’s illustrations:

… [A] surprising number of the major disorders of the latter part of the twentieth century and of the first decade of the twenty-first century have been brought about by some of the most distinguished graduates of some of the most distinguished universities in the world and this as the result of an inadequate general education, at both graduate and especially undergraduate levels, that has made it possible for those graduates to act decisively and deliberately without knowing what they were doing. Examples of such disasters include: the Vietnam War, the policies of the United States towards Iran for more than half a century, and the present world economic crisis.xxxv

Newman quotes approvingly his friend Davidson’s handy summary of the same dynamic: “[A] man who has been trained to think upon one subject or for one subject only, will never be a good judge even in that one.”xxxvi Moreover, for one’s broader social responsibilities, professional learning may supply nothing to distinguish one from an ill-educated person.xxxvii An intellect turned loose upon the world with credentials but not the knowledge that is its proper end damages more than itself, though all the damage done arises from that first distorting process.

In other words, the least effectively practical way to order education is to order it too narrowly to practical concerns. Against advocates of utilitarian reform at Oxford, Newman made just this case: its short-term scope makes utility-oriented education less useful than liberal education.xxxviii In pointing out the educational salience of the intellect’s need for mutually correcting glimpses of truth, Newman is hardly proposing “that the mind [wrap] itself up in a cocoon of knowledge and [go] into a fruitless sleep.”xxxix Liberal learning forms the mind in certain habits which equip it to use better whatever immediately useful knowledge it gathers;xli short-cuts around the liberal educated intellect yield a mind more vulnerable to potentially dangerous misdirection in even the subject area of one’s supposed speciality, so resisting the short-cut temptation is the fastest route after all to education’s contributions to human welfare.xli

As Newman puts it, “general culture of mind” places one “in that state of intellect in which he [sic] can take up any of the sciences or callings … for which he has a taste or special talent, with an ease, a grace, a versatility, and a success, to which another is a stranger.”xlii By the same token, when the University teaches professions such as law, medicine, geology, political economy, the teaching in such areas must resist the “danger of being absorbed and narrowed” by a short-range focus on current practice, must come to it “from a height” and with a “largeness of mind and freedom and self-possession” that permits treating the issues more philosophically and more resourcefully and so more effectively than belongs to the study itself.xliii Thus only with the large-mindedness arising from the university’s disciplines pressuring each other can professional learning amount to genuine learning.xlv By implication then, when a student embarks on a narrow professional concentration while the enlargement of his or her mind remains embryonic, it can “damage” the little growth one has had in that respect.xlv So avoiding this short-cut remains the one valid “short-cut” to the broadly knowledgeable thinking that, being good in itself, makes professional effectiveness both professional and effective.

IV. Liberal knowledge and the common good

By the same token, finally, Newman marks one more vital dimension of an education which subordinates quests for immediate utility to cultivation of intellect, namely, the way it serves “the formation of the citizen.”xlvii The art of the mind-enlarging education that is exhausted by no art is “the art of social life.”xlvii This good in itself “overflows” into good for others “and spreads the likeness of itself all around it,” particularly as “social and political usefulness.”xlviii Why?
Because of both its social or collective effects and its effects on how the educated individual conducts oneself interpersonally. The social effects include, as Newman names them, “raising the intellectual tone of society, ... cultivating the public mind, ... purifying the national taste, ... supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspiration, ... giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, ...” while the personal effects involve one’s clearer sense of one’s own views as well as one’s truth and persuasiveness in developing them, the ability to “disentangle a skein of thought, to detect what is sophistical, to discard what is irrelevant, ... to accommodate [oneself] to others, ... to throw [oneself] into their state of mind, ... to bring before them [one’s] own, ... to influence them, ... to bear with them.”

This sounds heavenly, does it not? Newman even holds that large-mindedness “scattered through society in a civilized age” bears a likeness to what Paul calls charity, one of the supernatural virtues. The university that cultivates the intellect resists the erosion of our awareness of our humanity, of the responsibility we bear as a species to become a community; liberating our humanity, the university helps to heal our world. Cultivating the intellect is the proper way that a university can, and must, “become an agent of change in the marketplace and the public forum.” While Newman’s basic view recalls the Greek ideal of πίστις, the educational disciplining of free citizens for membership in society, that observation alone does not explain the apparently boundless hope about education’s affect on person and society from the same Newman who was, by religious inspiration, conservative on many political questions.

For instance, Newman called Christians to “’a melancholy view of the world’” in his Development of Christian Doctrine. Citing the great catastrophes of history along with pervasive sin, Newman supposes that politicians can at best tinker a bit with humanity, and only transcendent power can achieve the needed recasting of human nature. Education itself affects the surface, not the “depths of the heart” that religion touches.

However, imagining a surface severed from depths is as wrong as concluding that depths are fully transformed with surface changes. Civilization for Newman can assume a sacramental character, thus, redemption, irreducible to social reform, is nonetheless connected to it. The rejection of facile optimism arises out of the same religious and philosophical conviction that rules out despair vis-à-vis politics. Great Christian thinkers like Augustine show a similar meeting of world-acceptance and world-renunciation. “We attain to heaven by using this world well,” Newman says, “though it is to pass away; we perfect our nature, not by undoing it, but by adding to it what is more than nature, and directing it towards aims higher than its own.” So seeing the need for more than education subtracts nothing from the educated mind and its praiseworthy capacity to move people toward better social interaction.

In order to comprehend Newman’s vision of an education shaping—through habits of the cultivated intellect—better persons in society, we must focus steadily on his insistence that the mind broadened by liberal knowledge is the mind that may well excel in promoting mutual understanding and social harmony. This is not education as social engineering. This liberal knowledge remains as free of social objectives as of any other. Its goal is the enlarged state it brings about within the minds involved in it, but this state of mind possessed by a citizenry must lift society’s cultural tone.

Leaving good outcomes far from automatic, Newman’s political thought identifies the prime instrument upon which political progress depends as reason, ratiocination, the natural but all too rare human activity of inspecting and sifting the determinative ideas of a social context. Likewise, in contrast with barbarism, civilization is “’that state to which man’s nature points and tends; it is the systematic use, improvement, and combination of those faculties which are his characteristic.’” Newman is not telling us to assess at the end of a 14-week Core Curriculum course an objective about knowing how ‘to throw oneself into the state of mind of others.’ Envisioning something as much more viable as it is harder to quantify for reports, he suggests we form in students, over the years of their work at connecting and correcting earlier partial glimpses of truth, a condition of disciplined mental cultivation. For the reason that can bring political progress needs people who ever obey the relentless demand of conscience to seek truth and to act in faithfulness to truth.

We note a persistent individualism within Newman’s thinking about progress in social harmony and justice, given that crucial role of one’s conscientious search for truth. Yet Newman’s theory of how ideas develop gives pride of place to corporate reason.
In fact, an unresolved tension between individualistic views and collectivist views enlivens his outlook, thanks to his determination to contend with the actual human situation in its complexity. The tradition of modern social thought in Catholicism, born with Leo’s year after Newman’s death, shares this same lively tension, making first and foremost the dignity of the human person but in the next breath insisting upon the person’s social nature; this tradition also makes truth and conscience rather than techniques of manufactured consent the basis for any hope of progress.

Any who are drawn to this tradition, and/or to Newman’s vision about social progress, are therefore led back to the university. Coming with a need for truth, the human mind does not find its fulfillment automatically or easily; rather, the intellect moves in the direction of truth through slowly building upon and modifying glimpses of truth, stitching them together, correcting them in light of each other. Most of us who advance toward truth do not do so as autodidacts, but as members of good university communities that make their top priority the mind’s movement toward its own most highly cultivated condition. While the university should also help one prepare to contribute through particular talents to the exchange of goods and services, it will do so better in the long run if this preparation prioritizes the same interconnecting and mutually correcting modes of knowing. For this is the educating that makes human society human: more elevated in tone, more principled, more sober about current ideas, where persons sort judiciously a tangled skein of thought, where they accommodate and empathize with and influence and forebear the thinking of others.

Today’s highly specialized yet finally still human culture is no less desperate than any other for thoughtfulness and spirit. Newman’s writings point the direction for restoring the modern university as an indispensable contributor to civilized community. It is a matter of ordering university functions to the formation of Trojan Horses, graduates who, while prepared to enter the exchange of goods and services, have come to know well and to cherish the humanizing life of the mind as a habitual stance wherein the truth of the common good governs even professional activities. Those who have enjoyed this humanizing life of the mind know the dignity of the human person in community not as words memorized for an exam and soon forgotten but as an experienced, a lived wonder. Even if redemption and supernatural charity work their transformative power at deeper dimensions of the heart, the life of the liberally educated mind does have, as Newman says, “its shadow, inseparable from it,” social and political benefit from the recognition of the dignity of others and the capacity to elevate societal tone and taste and sober, principled aspiration.

Higher education is no commodity to be bought and sold for private benefit; it is a public good with the power to resist forces that reduce students to “privatistic lifestyles.” It empowers them to integrate their livelihood into their broader calling to serve the common good. This deliberate and slow educational process is transformative for the student, if we do it well, and that transformation entails social transformation. The magic involved in this formulation is no magic at all; it is simply the fact that taking seriously the human mind’s need for truth—and for acquiring truth in ways suited to its own operations—makes a difference. The difference this makes for the person casts an unmistakable shadow of more just and more harmonious interactions of persons with one another and in their shared life as a society.

2 Ibid., 85, emphasis added.
3 Ibid., 114.
4 Ibid., 85, 103.
7 Ibid., 78.
8 Ibid., 114, 136.
Ibid., 91.


Newman, *The Idea of a University*, 81-82; see also 92.

Ibid., 126.


Newman, *The Idea of a University*, 127; see also 75.

Ibid.,115, 125, 85.


Lash, “A Seat of Wisdom, a Light of the World: Considering the University,” 190.


Ibid., 129.


Ibid., 15.


Ibid., 134; see also 109-110, 162-63, 176-77; Vargish, *Newman: the Contemplation of Mind*, 133.


Ibid., 134; see also 109-110, 162-63, 176-77; Vargish, *Newman: the Contemplation of Mind*, 133.


Ibid., 135.

Ibid., 144.

Lash, “A Seat of Wisdom, a Light of the World: Considering the University,” 199, 201.


Ibid.,30.


Ibid., 64.


Ibid., 153.

Ibid., 90, 164.


Ibid., 162-63.


