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Virtue, the University and the Limits of Critique

In 1917 a group of German university students invited the renowned sociologist Max Weber to Munich to participate in a lecture series entitled "intellectual work as vocation" [*geistige Arbeit als Beruf*]. The students met weekly in the backroom of a bookstore as the Bavarian chapter of the National Federation of Independent Student Groups, a loose association of students established around 1900 to make sense of the radical changes German universities had undergone in a matter of decades.

Between 1880 and 1910, German university enrollments doubled, state expenditures tripled—with most going to new research institutes and labs—and both teaching and research became more specialized. By 1900, the university's defenders and detractors referred to dear alma mater as a *Großbetrieb*—an industrial concern that produced knowledge through an increasingly differentiated division of intellectual labor.

The students wanted Weber to explain an institution they no longer recognized, an institution that, as one critic put it, had transformed the very idea of an "intellectual vocation" into a "corrupting monstrosity." "Is it possible," wrote the president of the student group, "to devote oneself completely to this unending task [geistige Arbeit] and still remain in this world? Is intellectual work still possible as a vocation?" In a modern world characterized by the division of labor, constant economic expansion, and unrelenting change, can universities sustain a morally robust and socially distinct way of life?

By accepting the invitation, Weber agreed to weigh in on a decades-long debate about the fate of moral education in the research university and the broader cultural anxiety that *Wissenschaft* [specialized knowledge] had eclipsed *Bildung* [moral formation]. [**Aside on *Wissenschaft*]** Since the 1870's, faculty members and intellectuals worried that



universities encouraged overly-specialized or, to use the term of the day, "micrological," research; that they overwhelmed students with too much information; and that they provided students with no coherent account of knowledge and, more fundamentally, their lives. Research universities produced human capital for a modern state; it did not form persons for good lives.

The rapid rise of research universities in the United States—such as Johns Hopkins and the University of Chicago and the reinvention of Harvard and Michigan—prompted similar anxieties. But whereas Germans spoke of the increasing difference between *Wissenschaft* and *Bildung*, the Americans spoke of an increasing gap between universities and colleges. Universities produced specialized research and participated in international disciplinary communities. Colleges formed character and instilled virtue in local communities.

By the 1890's William Rainey Harper, the University of Chicago's first president, contended that the research university had eclipsed the college in both size and stature. And this gap now threatened the integrity of undergraduate education. With the rise of research universities from Berlin to Baltimore, higher education had decoupled the pursuit of knowledge from questions of value and meaning and, thus, abandoned its primary historical purpose—the moral education of young people.

In the rest of my talk, I want to challenge this long-standing premise—the stark opposition of university and college, knowledge production and moral formation—and argue for a different understanding of the place of virtue in the university.

*Wissenschaft als Lebensform*

When Weber lectured in 1917 on the fate of "intellectual work as vocation," those present heard a version of what we know today as his famous essay "Science as Vocation." And so they heard Weber suggest that specialized scholarship [*Wissenschaft*] had nothing to say about the "ultimate" questions that drove their lives, that specialized

scholarship had nothing to offer on matters of value, that modern knowledge was meaningless. And ever since critics and defenders alike have associated Weber and "Science as Vocation" with the moral agnosticism of a value-free science and the hopelessness of bureaucratic, hyper-rationalized modernity. [**Weber would seem an odd source to talk about virtue and the modern university**]

And yet Weber deeply impressed his audience. Weber's effect on all of us that day, wrote the philosopher Karl Löwith, who was there, "was staggering." Everything Weber said was "summoned directly from deep within and thought through with a critical intellect and violently so. His words were haunted by a human gravity that lent him personality. His refusal to offer easy answers was matched only by the acuity of his questions." His words "redeemed" us (*Mein Leben* 16-17).

In recalling his experience in Munich, Löwith described not just Max Weber the famed sociologist of Western modernity, but the ideal modern, if very German, scholar: biting, critical, and disciplined but also humane, imaginative, and passionate. Weber embodied, that is, the singular virtue of an institution presumed to have none: what Weber called "intellectual rectitude" [intellektuelle Rechtschaffenheit].

The purpose of the university, Weber argued in Munich, was "to cultivate in students one virtue: intellectual rectitude." And like generations of German scholars before him, Weber associated this scholarly virtue with *Wissenschaft*. One of the first defenders of *Wissenschaft* as a distinct epistemic and ethical tradition was Wilhelm von Humboldt, the early nineteenth-century scholar and bureaucrat who helped establish the University of Berlin. He argued that specialized scholarship—what we know today as university-based knowledge and research—formed a particular type of person and was sufficient to fund not only a professional career but also a coherent and self-sustaining form of life. *Wissenschaft* was *Bildung*.

*Bildung*, from the German bilden (to form) and Bild (image or imago), had for most of the eighteenth century referred to a process of moral or ethical formation, the process



through which a person formed himself and was formed in accord with exemplary images. But whereas the moral exemplars of the eighteenth century had been either classical figures such as Cicero or Christian ones such as Christ, Humboldt presented the modern, specialized scholar as the most apposite moral exemplar. *Wissenschaft*, wrote Nietzsche's teacher and renowned philologist Friedrich Ritschl, was "the greatest means of moral education" because it gave students "truth" and "made [them] good" (Ritschl, *Kleine Schriften* v. 5: 23).

*The Ethical Shape of Philology and Epistemic Virtues*

For most of the nineteenth century, German scholars considered philology the exemplary science, because philology was the first discipline to develop epistemic and ethical ideals.

Philology was autonomous. It had, wrote Ritschl, freed itself from theology and the state and could "stand on its own two feet" (5:32). [**Aside: history of philology and theology]** Autonomy meant that philology could articulate and support its own internal goods and practices that made them possible.

Philology reconceived of knowledge as research [Forschung]. Unlike the philologists and classicists of 15C-18C European humanism, the philologists of the 19C conceived of knowledge not as erudition, the display of knowledge, but as its "endless pursuit."

These epistemic ideals had distinct ethical entailments. They helped shape the daily pursuit of knowledge and the type of person required to excel in it. German philologists linked epistemic value to epistemic virtue. An essay or book was *scholarly* because a scholar wrote it and, thus, was the creation of a person of particular virtue.

*So who was the ideal scholar, the embodiment, Weber's intellectual rectitude?*

The ideal scholar was critical. In 1869, the historian and then secretary of the Prussian Academy of the Sciences Theodor Mommsen defined critique as

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> the so-called rigorous philological method. That simply means the ruthlessly honest pursuit of the truth [Wahrheitsforschung] that in both big and small things doesn't shy away from any toil, that doesn't buckle before any doubt, that doesn't paint over any gaps in the tradition or its own knowledge, and that gives an account to itself and others. It means carrying this method into other areas which a sloppy and dishonest dilettantism has long predominated and in which buzzwords and quackery have grown wild.

Critique referred not just to a method but to an ethos. Critique wasn't simply something you did; it was who you were: ruthless, honest, truth-seeking, strong, thorough, brave, careful, and single-minded. A *scholar* was critical, whereas a dilatant or gentleman scholar was uncritical and, therefore—hear the moral opprobrium—lazy, shallow, sloppy, unfocused, and inattentive.

The ideal scholar was rigorous and disciplined. Everything had to be repeatedly tested.

The ideal scholar was industrious and tireless. Intellectual or scholarly goods were primarily attained not through grace or its secular analogue, genius, but through hard work. Modern scholars, as one 19C scientist put, would never reach "an ever lasting period of rest, in which [they could] give [themselves] over to unending contemplation." There was no eschatological future in which to hope; there was only work in the eternal present.

But the ideal scholar was also intuitive and imaginative. The philologists' historical-critical method required understanding and empathy in order to bridge the gap between the past and the present. Righty practiced philology was a path to a transcendence, but a communion not with the God of Protestant theology but rather with the ancients, "the dead."

The ideal scholar was faithful to a tradition. These historical-critical practices required a



certain faith in the continuity of historical ideas, that the texts of the past could be passed on continuously through time and were meaningful for those in the present.

But what could support such a faith in a faith-less age? In short: scholarly method.

As practiced in the seminars of nineteenth-century German universities, method was a form of catechesis that focused students' attention not only on texts but on themselves. Method cultivated in students a constant reflection on their own actions, desires, and personality. Philological virtue, Weber's intellectual rectitude, had to be instilled through long a process of formation or, as Ritschl referred to it, *Zucht* (breeding).

But most importantly method brought philologists together. It instilled in them, as Ritschl put it, a "consciousness" that their capacities and activities were "only a link in a much bigger chain" (5:15). Scholarly virtue—intellectual rectitude—was oriented toward transcendence in the form of a timeless community of scholars, towards a truth always deferred.

*Nietzsche and the Limits of Critique*

And yet critique, method and intellectual rectitude had their limits. In a letter to a university friend and fellow philologist around 1870, Friedrich Nietzsche described his teacher and *Doktorvater* Friedrich Ritschl as a "wissenschaftliches Gewisssen" (scholarly conscience). Nietzsche's training in the philology seminar under Ritschl hadn't just given him tools to read ancient texts, it had formed who he had become and instilled within him ascetic ideals of self-control, conscientiousness, discipline, attention to detail, self-critique, and, as Mommsen put it, a "ruthlessly honest pursuit of the truth." Before Nietzsche described the bad conscience of Christian morality in *The Genealogy of Morality,* he described the bad conscience of the critical philologists.

"What in us," Nietzsche asked in *Beyond Good and Evil*, "actually wants truth" (5:15)?

What was the value of intellectual rectitude and philological critique and its unblinking commitment to *the truth*?

As soon as Nietzsche arrived at the University of Basel in 1867 as a 24-year old professor of ancient Greek literature, he began to doubt the moral and intellectual value of specialized scholarship and thus the underlying premise of the German research university: that *Wissenschaft* was *Bildung*, that specialized scholarship could sustain a distinct form of life. And he wasn't the only scholar to do so.

After the founding of the German Reich in 1871, the German university changed dramatically. It became less a scholastic monastery and more a *Großbetrieb.* Mommsen worried that modern university with its specialized scholarship produced alienated "workers" who had no idea of the end for which they labored. And Rudolf Virchow, a German physiologist, warned natural scientists that they were "Halbwisser" with only the faintest idea of the whole. Their lives like their work were incoherent and fragmented.

And so Nietzsche, Mommsen, and Virchow argued for a constrained vision of *Wissenschaft*: of what it could and a clear acknowledgement of what it could *not* do. Weber's thinking fits squarely in this tradition of thinking about the limits of science and modern knowledge.

*Weber on critique as virtue and intellectual rectitude*

On a trip to the United States in 1904, Weber toured a number of American universities and colleges. He returned to Germany intrigued in particular by what he called the "ethos" and "culture" of American colleges, especially the emphasis they placed on forming moral character. Weber spent the next 13 years considering the difference between an education oriented toward moral education and one oriented toward the professional training needed in advanced industrial societies, a distinction he saw embodied in the difference between universities and American colleges.



Weber's thinking culminated in his response to the student group in Munich, his lecture "Science as Vocation." By 1917 Weber had concluded that traditional moral education—be it German *Bildung* or the American collegiate ideal—could not be fully reconciled with modern knowledge and the modern university. The unity of humanistic *Bildung* and *Wissenschaft*—the underlying premise of the German university—was no longer tenable.

"Our aim," he told those gathered in the lecture hall, "must be to enable students to discover the vantage point from which he can judge the matter in light of his own ultimate ideals"—ideals that students received not from the university and its myriad and fragmented disciplines but from elsewhere, from institutions and traditions outside the university. Specialized scholarship, and thus the university, offered no answers to life's ultimate questions.

*Wissenschaft*, Weber famously wrote, was "meaningless" because it could not answer the most basic questions: "what should we do" and "how should we live." Do not turn to science (modern knowledge), he warned, in search of answers to "the ultimate and deepest personal decisions" about their lives. (Weber, 49).

For a century now, critics have seized on what they consider Weber's account of a diminished and morally impotent *Wissenschaft* and modern knowledge more generally. As one of his contemporary critics put it in 1919, Weber had separated *Wissenschaft* from its primary end, "the formation of humanity"[*Bildung zur Humanität*] (65-66).

But in what sense was modern knowledge meaningless?

Weber considered *Wissenschaft* an ethical tradition, the guardian of intellectual rectitude and scholarly practices. And he insisted that the university could still "accomplish something" [etwas leisten]. So what could Wisssenschaft and the university do, and what could they not do?

1) Wissenschaft could not ground itself. It was not the "bearer of ultimate values

that lent it authority and legitimacy" (Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion*). The values that motivated a student to devote himself to *Wissenschaft* were ultimately external to the university. The legitimacy, authority, and flourishing of *Wissenschaft* required scholars to look for values beyond science and the university. [Motivational deficit]. It could never adequately answer the question: Why *Wissenschaft*?

2) And so Wissenschaft was fragile. Weber's contemporaries turned to *Wissenschaft* to create values and renew the "whole of man." But Weber feared that *Wissenschaft* could not bear such weighty moral demands and worried that those who wanted more from a "new science" would undermine whatever integrity, coherence and goods that it could offer.

2) Wissenschaft also demanded a certain kind of faith or, at the very least, trust. Modern science, Weber famously wrote, had disenchanted the modern world. Everything could, "at least in principle," be explained. We no longer had to stare in dumb wonder at the movements of the stars or tremble in terrorizing fear of the ocean. Because we could explain nature.

But such explanations didn't extinguish belief and wonder. They merely shifted their object. Not everyone could explain everything, only scientists could. And even then only "in principle." The de-magiced [*Ent-zauberung*] world required a belief in expertise and specialized knowledge. And that was a wondrous but also a dangerous thing. The limits of science had to be articulated and respected. Weber's disenchanted science was a warning against prophets posing as scholars, declaiming moral truths in the name of *Wissenschaft* in lecture halls where their charismatic authority could go unchecked.

*What does this mean for universities today?*



In the United States, at least, universities are currently embroiled in protests, walkouts, and very public condemnations. Part of that has to do with the recent attempts of academic leaders, faculty and students to recover rather unreflectively older modes of moral education as a way of making the case for the university's public value.

In her commencement address last year, Harvard's president Drew Gilpin Faust spoke bluntly of her fears arising from "the tumultuous state of American politics." Then she told the class of 2016, "With the rise of the research university in the late 19th and early 20th century, moral and ethical purposes came to be seen as at odds with the scientific thinking transforming higher education. But in today's world I believe it is dangerous for universities not to fully acknowledge and embrace their responsibilities to values and to service, as well as to reason and discovery." As President Faust thinks about how to put this thought into practice, I'd suggest that she and all of us would do well to recall Weber reflections on moral education in a modern age from which I draw three points in conclusion:

1) The research university has own ethical practices and resources: what I've described today as Weber's intellectual rectitude and the longer tradition of philological critique and Wissenschaft. We need to recognize and defend these traditions as the internal goods, virtues, and practices that they are. Contrary to what Stanley Fish might argue, scholarly values and practices are not simply bureaucratic or professional procedures. They are robust epistemic virtues embedded in historical practices. And they provide those within and outside the university with essential goods.

2) And yet these scholarly practices are insufficient and the institution that maintains them, the university, has clear moral limitations. Under the conditions of a pluralistic modernity, universities cannot impart comprehensive visions of the good. They cannot provide ultimate moral ends. Their goods are proximate.

3) And so, universities need to look outside themselves and partner with other moral traditions and resources. Universities may not be able to impart comprehensive visions of

the good but they are uniquely positioned, given their own practices and traditions, to sustain encounters between traditions and help students develop capacities to engage in debates and conversations that take their deepest and oftentimes conflicting values seriously and do not conceal them in the name of a vague liberalism.