





# Melancholy Mandarins

## *Bloom, Weber, and Moral Education*

Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon

AS AN EPITHET FOR THE UNIVERSITY, “ALMA mater”—nourishing mother—has proved unfortunately apt. Like modern-day mothers, universities are subjected to impossible expectations and draconian judgment. Professors assiduously avoid administrative work but rail against the overhiring of administrators and encroachments on faculty self-governance. Students expect expansive support services and state-of-the-art recreational facilities but express outrage over the fees that help pay for them. Politicians wax indignant over everything from professors’ teaching schedules to admissions policies and the university’s defining pursuits, such as inquiry not tied to practical aims. Journalists proclaim that resistance to change has made our universities obsolete, when they’re not complaining that they’ve changed too much, too fast. But as long as the American university has existed in its modern shape, one lament has stood out—that of the melancholy mandarins.

Relying mostly on anecdotal evidence, and writing in accessible, simplifying prose, an insider-outsider figure—almost always a

male humanities professor with solid academic credentials—condemns the culture of specialized research. He tells readers that as a result of this and other ills, alma mater has lost her way. Our once great institutions of higher learning have strayed from their mission of guiding young people through the process of building a soul, a failure that is both a symptom and a cause of a broader decline in our system of values. The lament culminates in a call for colleges and universities to rededicate themselves to the humanities in the right way. Pushing them to do so is the best chance we have to save ourselves from our malaise.

### *Bloom’s Crisis of Civilization*

Mortimer Adler, a professor of law and erstwhile philosopher at the University of Chicago, was a virtuoso of this form. In 1941, for example, he maintained that his faculty colleagues at Chicago posed a more serious threat to civilization than Hitler. Three-quarters of a century later, William

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Left: *Un savant*, 1933, by Paul Klee (1879–1940); Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY; © 2017 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Deresiewicz asserted that elite higher education in the United States was bad for the soul. The Ivies were “turning our kids into zombies,” he wrote.<sup>1</sup> But the greatest of lamenters was another University of Chicago academic, Allan Bloom, whose 1987 masterpiece of high-minded melancholy, *The Closing of the American Mind*, spent months atop the *New York Times* bestseller list. Nearly overnight, Bloom went from being a little-known political philosopher and translator of Plato and Rousseau to being President Reagan’s guest at the White House and Prime Minister Thatcher’s at Chequers.

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Nor was there any shortage of praise from the press. *The Times* (London) *Sunday Review* hailed *The Closing of the American Mind* as “an extraordinary meditation on the fate of liberal education in this country.” In the *Washington Post*, George F. Will called it a “‘how to’ book for the few... who want to know how to be independent.” *Newsweek* ran several admiring pieces.<sup>2</sup>

Bloom’s timing was excellent, needless to say. He forcefully denounced “value relativism” at a moment when those likely to share his antipathy were energized and in power—Ronald Reagan, constitutional originalists, and the Moral Majority. Furthermore, academic literary theory, one of Bloom’s targets, was just then a source of fascination and dismay for lovers of high culture. “The Tyranny of the Yale Critics,” a *New York Times Magazine* article from 1986, mocked Jacques Derrida as “King Babar,” while also portraying him as a classically educated guerilla fighter who might occupy the corner office but still spoiled for blood. Indeed, Derrida was quoted as describing his own method of analysis

as “very dangerous.”<sup>3</sup> Something, it appeared, had gone wrong in humanities seminar rooms.

Bloom told alarmed parents and observers of academia that they were entirely justified in their concerns. Those things that seemed suspiciously hostile to great works—deconstruction, for example—were bad for young minds. And the stakes couldn’t be higher. The university’s failings, Bloom wrote, constituted not only an intellectual crisis but a “crisis of civilization.”

Of course, Bloom’s book elicited many critical responses, the bulk of them coming from his fellow academics. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum, for one, accused Bloom of being a symptom of the disease for which he saw himself as the cure. His aim was to reveal that what looked like a new openness in American society—the idea that one perspective is potentially as valuable as any other—actually represented a closing, because this outlook cut off the thinker from the reflective search for Truth. But with its dogmatic style, Nussbaum claimed, Bloom’s book was itself thoroughly closed.

### *A New Form of Soul-Making*

The melancholy mandarins of the twenty-first century share with Bloom the conviction that the humanities are, as Deresiewicz has written, “what we have, in a secular society, instead of religion.”<sup>4</sup> As modern science and enlightened skepticism eroded traditional beliefs, the humanities “supplanted” religion’s capacity to console us and help us make sense of the world. The humanities are a form of “soul-making,” as Mark Edmundson has put it.

In his acclaimed *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (2012), Andrew Delbanco, an English professor at Columbia, writes that college should be “a place where young people fight out among and within themselves contending ideas of the meaningful life.”<sup>5</sup> And yet an ever-smaller percentage of first-year college students say that

one of the things *they* hope for from college is “to develop a meaningful philosophy of life.” During the two decades before Bloom’s book appeared, the number dropped by nearly half: from 82 percent to 43, according to the historian of education Roger Geiger.<sup>6</sup> It’s likely that many factors are involved in this decline, and it’s certainly plausible that one of them is growing doubt about whether the humanities seminar can provide the right sort of wisdom.

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**Do students and humanities professors actually believe in the power of humanities?**

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Most humanities professors can recount heartening “conversion experiences,” as they sometimes refer to them, in which an apparently disengaged student was transformed after a particular reading or discussion. But if professors and sympathetic commentators are to make the case for the soul-building version of the humanities as both desirable and tenable, then, given the beleaguered state of the humanities in higher education today, they need to assess the tenability of their own assumptions with greater openness. The mandarins’ call to put discussions of the meaningful life at the center of things still appeals to a lot of readers, most of whom graduated from college decades ago, but in the long run, failing to ask the hard questions will undermine the force of their message and its capacity to inspire.

***Losing Faith in the Humanities***

Perhaps operating under somewhat more favorable conditions made it easier for Bloom to press forward where his successors back off. Today’s academic humanists would surely relish a national and public debate about which books were worth reading; instead, we mostly wonder whether the

humanities will survive at all.<sup>7</sup> And what advocate of college-level humanistic study wants to question whether Americans bound for four-year colleges have faith in the humanities when, even at the best schools, humanities departments live in fear of budgetary annihilation?

Or perhaps conservatives such as Bloom just do cultural decline narratives better, and liberal progressives like Deresiewicz and Delbanco could learn from them. Feeling no obligation to anticipate a better future, Bloom may have felt freer to explore the problem. In any case, Bloom, to his credit, went far beyond the perennial complaint that students in required humanities courses seem less engaged than they used to be. As Nietzsche had, he raised the discomfiting question of whether students and humanities professors themselves actually believe in the promise of the humanities—in their purported power to transform.

Bloom, himself an avowed atheist, understood that the process of secularization wasn’t limited to the erosion of religious beliefs or to the diminution of the place of religion in institutions where it once had a dominant role, such as universities. Anything that has attained a sacral character can be secularized, including the liturgies of literature. To devote oneself to the humanities required, in Bloom’s account, a deep faith in the transformative power of texts and a measure of pious subordination to their authority and wisdom. Hence his stricture that classical authors should be read “as they wished to be read.”

But those charged with caring for these texts and sharing them with students had lost their faith. Humanities professors, wrote Bloom, “no longer believe [in] themselves or [in] what they do.” As a result, the situation of universities had come to resemble that of contemporary churches. “Nobody is quite certain,” he claimed, what exactly either institution is supposed to do anymore, even as most assume that they continue to address “a real human need or the vestige of what was once a need.”<sup>8</sup> Empty

English departments are the equivalent of empty European churches.

### *Creating Gentlemen Capitalists*

Despite their differing views on the fate of the humanities in the modern age, Bloom and the more recent melancholy mandarins agree that the research university has undermined the kind of education they deem so essential. It compartmentalizes inquiry into ever more specialized domains and thus makes “knowledge of the whole man,” Bloom’s formula for the end of education, impossible. Delbanco, in laying out what college should be, distinguished the purpose of research universities from that of the undergraduate colleges they house. Whereas the former produces new knowledge, the latter enables “self-discovery” or the formation of “a new soul,” he wrote, citing the German sociologist Max Weber, the man credited with first using the term “mandarin,” which had referred to Confucian scholar-bureaucrats, to describe Western intellectuals not lacking in self-importance.

In 1904, Weber and his wife, Marianne, traveled to the St. Louis Congress of Arts and Sciences, where he delivered several lectures. The Webers spent almost three months in the United States, in the course of which the couple visited several postsecondary institutions, including Northwestern University, outside Chicago, and Haverford College, a small Quaker school near Philadelphia. These visits made a lasting impression. Weber was particularly fascinated by the “ethos” and “culture” of American colleges, especially the emphasis they placed on forming moral character.

After returning to Germany, Weber continued to reflect on the distinction between an education geared toward building character and one oriented toward the professional training needed in advanced industrial societies, a distinction American institutions helped him better

understand. Despite the vast differences among them, American universities still maintained something of the “old college system with its boarding-school coercion and its strict discipline.” These collegiate elements, Weber observed, ensured that the primary purpose of American universities was not, as in Germany, scholarship, but rather the “development of personality such that students can learn to assert themselves among equals, grown adults, the development of a disposition that serves as the foundation of the American state and social systems.”<sup>9</sup> German universities aimed to create scholars and trained professionals, whereas American universities aimed to create hard-working gentleman capitalists. Weber concluded that German universities and, thus, Germany as a whole, would soon be unable to compete with such “productive power.”

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According to Delbanco, Weber’s early-twentieth-century typology neatly captures the difference between a college and a research university. Ideally, the two institutions would complement one another, Delbanco suggests, but in practice the research university has overrun collegiate ideals.

But there is also a great irony to the melancholy mandarins’ position. It was the modern research university, after all, that sacralized the humanities, accorded them prestige, and made the study of humanities an end in itself, providing a foundation for the academic freedom that, according to the mandarins, “real education” requires. The modern research university created the humanities as we know them today. Despite their differences in context and disposition, Bloom and Weber understood both this and the profound

contradictions that followed. Even more reason, on the thirtieth anniversary of Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* and the centennial of Weber's *Science as a Vocation*, that we return to those texts in order to make sense of the permanent crisis of the humanities in the modern age.

### *Serving Only Reason Itself*

The humanities have been taught in various forms in universities for centuries. Until the advent of the research university in the nineteenth century, however, they were taught primarily as a preparatory program for the study of law, medicine, or theology. Philosophy, philology, history, rhetoric, and literature were part of the university's lower faculty—what medieval and early modern universities typically termed the faculty of arts and sciences or the philosophy faculty. The lower faculty was subordinate to the higher, professional faculties. Its members earned less, were accorded less prestige, and had to walk behind members of the higher faculties in the convocations and disputations that filled the early modern university calendar. More consequentially, however, the lower faculty could be censored by the theology faculty. The humanities, as eighteenth-century German scholars referred to them, were merely “supplementary” fields of study.

Around 1800, a group of German reformers sought to upset this order, their idea being, as Immanuel Kant put it, to make the last faculty the first, and thus make humanistic study the most important. It was the humanities, the reformers argued, that deserved to be taught for their own sake. All of the other faculties were professional, and therefore subordinate to external ends and purposes. Theology served the church; law served the state; medicine served the public. But the humanities, the center of the philosophy faculty, served only reason itself.

Aware of who would be paying for the reorganized university, the reformers stressed that

reason would, if indirectly, also serve the interests of the state. Wilhelm von Humboldt, the chief architect of the new university, claimed that the pursuit of “objective knowledge” would lead also to “subjective development.” If universities integrated research and teaching, they would form citizens of substance, morally and intellectually. The free systematic exploration of art and ideas, particularly those from classical culture, would have that effect. And by bringing together in this way the energetic and nimble minds of students and the seasoned intellects of professors, the university would have a major advantage over scientific academies, where the average age tended to be high and the responsibility to share knowledge was less robust. The university would have a better chance of being the site of significant and also useful innovations. Pure research would, paradoxically, have practical benefits—but only if the state granted universities the freedom they needed to thrive.

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Humboldt had little use for the corporate privileges of the medieval university. (In the eighteenth century, academic freedom had meant freedom *from* such privileges and the practices they allowed for, e.g., monopolization of the most popular course topics by senior professors.) He wanted—and, with his fellow reformers, helped invent—a new notion of academic freedom that made the claim for academic knowledge as a public good, rather than as a professorial perk: “The state must always remain aware that it cannot and will not acquire on its own the scientific and scholarly knowledge it wants; in fact,

that it is never anything but an impediment as soon as it meddles directly in the production of knowledge.”<sup>10</sup> For Humboldt, academic freedom served the interests of the state and scholarship.

During the nineteenth century, the reformers’ dreams were, in one sense, largely realized. Humanistic inquiry was liberated from law, medicine, and theology, and humanities scholarship flourished. Universities in Berlin, Göttingen, and Heidelberg established the standards of systematic scholarship for everything from philosophy and classics to history and literature. New mechanisms for promotion were institutionalized. Research seminars were founded. Professional journals and societies were created. The modern principle of faculty self-governance was put into practice. And though its dependence on German state governments made for complications, the research university moved toward giving scholars academic freedom—the institutional space and support to teach and write what they wanted. As the Prussian constitution of 1850 codified it, “Scholarship and its teachings are free.”

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But as humanities scholarship advanced, scholars within the university, as well as critics outside it, began to worry that the success of the research university had ushered in a fragmented and ever narrower kind of knowledge. The modern university and its ideals of pure research and academic autonomy may have helped free the humanities, but they also paved the way for another master: specialization.

A new generation of university reformers in Germany responded to this development by invoking the unity of knowledge. Doing so would, they hoped, encourage professors to talk

to each other across the disciplines, to keep big cross-disciplinary questions of general human importance in view, and to see themselves as part of an ethical community striving toward a shared end. This hope was not borne out.

### *Cultivating the Good and the True*

Less than seventy years after the first research university was established in Berlin, Nietzsche inveighed against the extreme division of labor in the humanities. With every classical scholar filing away at his little “screw” or “handle,”<sup>11</sup> the humanities had ceded to journalism the “serious general” questions as well as “the deepest philosophical problems,” which had no place in a system of knowledge production that was soon dubbed by German historian Theodor Mommsen as “the heavy industry of scholarship.” Classical culture was being run through a giant philological mill, where it was stripped of its meaning and its function as a living model. Students received technical training rather than real education—*Ausbildung* rather than *Bildung*. According to Nietzsche, the nineteenth century witnessed not “the victory of scholarship,” but “the victory of specialized scholarly methods over scholarship.”

As elite American colleges began to recast themselves as research universities in the late nineteenth century, and as the attendant culture of specialization set in, educators and administrators voiced similar concerns. Even figures who had embraced the German model, like Columbia’s longtime president Nicholas Murray Butler, worried that the model, as it had been adapted to American circumstances, didn’t leave room for the attention to character that had been so central to American higher education. Consequently, many leaders, Butler among them, sought to reform undergraduate education.

But the moral education Columbia University adopted in 1917 through its pioneering general



education program wasn't merely a secularized version of the moral education practiced in the classical antebellum college. The curriculum of the latter had been premised on the ideal of the unity of the good and the true, grounded in one form or another of vaguely Protestant theology, and capped off with a course led by someone trained to attend to the soul—a minister. The antebellum American college required Bible studies and chapel attendance, and enforced strict codes of moral behavior. It valued discipline and tradition over open exchange and critical thought. Columbia's "War Aims" course and then its legendary Humanities and Civilization curriculum did almost none of this. The first was a frank apology for American involvement in World War I and the second an attempt to provide curricular coherence through directed reading. Whatever coherence was (or was not) established through these curricular reforms, it was of a different sort from the more comprehensive moral cultures of the classical American colleges, which made almost full claim on the lives of their students.

There were, to be sure, some similarities between the moral education of antebellum colleges and general education programs. But, as Weber repeatedly argued, that's just what education systems do—they cultivate students for a particular "conduct of life" and instill the virtues most valued in a given society.

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So what was the shape of moral education in universities and colleges over the course of the twentieth century? In short, academic freedom became the highest end and moral education

became primarily an extracurricular activity.<sup>12</sup> Twentieth-century universities separated the education of the mind from that of the soul. The college or university president no longer taught the senior seminar on moral theology; he increasingly recruited faculty and raised money. Values and commitments were certainly formed during a student's time in college, just not primarily in a classroom or through a curriculum grounded, however broadly, in an American Protestantism. The more expansive moral locus of education steadily shifted to clubs, sports, activism, and campus religious and cultural centers.

### *Shaping a Secular Soul in the Classroom*

By the time Harvard released its influential report *General Education in a Free Society* (1945), a very different ideal student had emerged, and with that student a different form of moral education, one more compatible with the now ascendant research university and postwar American democracy. As the report put it, the purpose of the humanities was to enable "man to understand man in relation to himself, that is to say, in his inner aspirations and ideals."<sup>13</sup> General education, and the humanities in particular, was now about fostering the values of openness, critical thinking and reflection, inclusiveness, and equity. "General education," wrote the Harvard faculty members, "is distinguished from special education not so much in terms of the subject of matter as in terms of method and outlook."<sup>14</sup> Despite the distinction, the "method and outlook" of general education were in fact fully amenable to the demands of the research university, because there, academic freedom and unconstrained thought were prized above other values such as respect for tradition and the recognition of legitimate authority. These values were now cast as the "intangibles of the American spirit."<sup>15</sup> Within the classroom, universities and colleges increasingly understood their role in moral education as



one of developing liberal moral agents—that is, helping young people develop capacities (critical thinking, reflection, understanding, self-awareness) they would need to function as self-aware citizens and make moral decisions on their own. As German neohumanists had stressed more than a century earlier, these same values would foster the substantive advancement of knowledge. As much as today's critics lament the decline of the traditional mission of moral education and the rise of the research imperative, what they actually long for is an education that would form just these types of liberal, autonomous students. Take William Deresiewicz (again): Moral education, he writes, “develops students’ abilities to make autonomous choices—to determine [their] own beliefs, independent of parents, peers, and society.”<sup>16</sup> The ideal student is one who can choose her own moral ideals and craft her own moral life.

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**Could modern universities form students to a morally robust and socially distinct way of life? And should they?**

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Moral education in this sense is less the shaping of a secular soul in the classroom, less the inculcation of particular systems of belief and the moral ideals that go with them, and more the cultivation in students of the capacity to think for themselves, determine fact from falsehood, and reckon circumspectly with their own beliefs and commitments. It isn't the kind of moral education that a student might have received in a church, an early-nineteenth-century college, or even a more orthodox religious community.

This diminished notion of moral education is reminiscent of the one Weber argued for in his famous 1917 lecture *Science as a Vocation*. A group of German university students had invited the renowned sociologist to Munich to participate in a lecture series titled *Geistige Arbeit als Beruf*

(“Intellectual work as vocation”). The students wanted Weber to explain an institution they no longer recognized, an institution that had been transformed—by industrialization, bureaucracy, pluralism, and all the other cataclysmic effects of modernity.

“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, could universities sustain and form students to a morally robust and socially distinct way of life? And should they?

***A Pedagogy of Demagoguery***

Even before his trip to the United States in 1904, Weber had been deeply suspicious of fellow academics and intellectuals who touted *Weltanschauungen* (a particular worldview or philosophy of life) and shared forms of life, and he disdained the sacerdotal professors who peddled moral absolutes from the protected confines of the lecture hall. In fact-versus-value debates within the Verein für Sozialpolitik (German Economic Association) on humanistic and social scientific method, Weber had first articulated such suspicions in the 1890s, when he dismissed the claims of German economists of the historical school to deliver “scientific” advice on policy to the state.<sup>17</sup> From his first rumblings about the overtly political aims of economists, Weber consistently warned against the desire of intellectuals and scholars to transform souls or society. Such ambitions undermined the integrity of scholarship and encouraged a pedagogy of demagoguery. On the other hand, Weber had become increasingly concerned about the fate of academic freedom in an environment of extreme political fracture.

Weber's speech in Munich was the culmination of his thinking on all these issues. By 1917,

he had concluded that traditional moral education—be it German *Bildung* or the American collegiate ideal—could not be fully reconciled with the modern university and the needs of a modern society. “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.” Specialized scholarship, and thus the university, offered no answers to life’s ultimate questions. *Wissenschaft* (scholarship), he famously wrote, was “meaningless” because it could not answer the most basic questions: “What should we do” and “How should we live.” You should not turn to science and modern scholarship, he warned those gathered in the Munich lecture hall, in search of answers to “the ultimate and deepest personal decisions” about your lives.<sup>18</sup>

Society had changed, and so had the university. Universities were bound to, if not wholly determined by, the societies in which they were found. For much of the speech, Weber laid out the external problems plaguing modern universities: a winner-take-all job market that left excellent scholars languishing in penury, hiring committees that consistently went for mediocrity, and crude attempts to measure teaching effectiveness.

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But he focused on what he called the university’s internal conditions and what he acknowledged was a pervasive malaise, a sense of loss now that knowledge had to be pursued under the conditions of modernity. Modern universities allowed for the open pursuit of knowledge, but the specialization that resulted from this freedom

brought with it fragmentation and disciplinary isolation. Scholars had been liberated, only to find themselves constrained in new ways. The modern university was an inhospitable institution for those in search of a transcendent, universal perspective. Weber devoted much of his scholarly oeuvre to the claim that there was no knowledge, no form of rationality, that was not the knowledge of specialists. The ideal of a unified, universal knowledge—what nineteenth-century Germans called the *Einheit der Wissenschaft*, and Americans called moral theology—was for a different era. Now it was a dangerous illusion that gave demagogues, charlatans, and irrationalism an opening.

Once this ideal was no longer tenable, argued Weber, the relationship between scholarship and what might seem to be the most important kinds of questions fundamentally changed: whether you should or should not, say, join this or that political movement or embrace one religious tradition over another—or none at all. Which decision made sense, according to Weber, would depend on one’s own ultimate ideals, and adopting ideals, including the ideal of free systematic scholarship, required an act of faith incompatible with the practices and methods of the modern research university. The disintegration of the university into competing and ever more distinct enclaves also signaled its end as a certain kind of moral institution.

### *The Empathetic Imagination*

Thus, Weber’s research ideal and the freedom it funded had a price—they led away from the more explicit character-building college communities he had seen and admired in America and relegated the German tradition of *Bildung* to a past age. A range of critics immediately castigated Weber for what they considered his impoverished account of knowledge and the university. Weber’s *Wissenschaft* was, as Ernst Kahler wrote in 1919, the “shrunk remains of a great old wisdom.”<sup>19</sup>

As another critic put it, Weber had sundered *Wissenschaft* from what German scholars for decades had considered its primary end, “the formation of humanity” (*Bildung zur Humanität*).<sup>20</sup> Weber had even referred to philosophy as a mere “*Fachdisziplin*”—a research specialization—having little to do with wisdom or a particularly moral way of life.

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**Science had its own moral sensibility—it was intellectually upstanding.**

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For many of Weber’s critics, the purpose of a university was to articulate and defend not just an account of the world (*Weltbild*) but an exalted *Weltanschauung*, and form students accordingly. The perceived loosening of university education and *Weltanschauungen* was a persistent lament of melancholy moderns from Nietzsche to Heidegger, as well as all the adherents to the concept of *Lebensphilosophie* (philosophy of life) in between—men like Wilhelm Dilthey and Max Scheler, who longed for a unity of scholarship and life. Weber’s blunt denunciation of such high-minded aspirations represented, then, a moral failure, a capitulation to the demands of the day and a radically reduced and resigned stance.

But Weber elected not to pine for a lost age of more morally serious education, as did many of contemporaries, the first melancholy mandarins. Instead, he asked how exactly the university and modern knowledge were meaningless and whether the university could continue to be worthwhile in spite of its change in purpose and its increasingly bureaucratic character.

Weber’s contemporaries may have denounced him for advancing the mindset and values of “the technician,” but he was making the case for something between technical or vocational education and traditional *Bildung*. Science had its own moral sensibility. Its orienting

value—being “intellectually upstanding,” in Weber’s phrase—was no trivial benefit. Not only that, Weber promoted, and displayed in his *Science as a Vocation* speech, an imaginative mode of historical understanding that entailed trying to put oneself in the position of living at different times and in different places, and thus facilitating the development of the empathetic faculties on which one’s ethical faculties could rely. He also emphasized that part of the value of scholarship lay in how it enabled one to think through the possible social effects of one’s moral choices and the actions that proceed from them, to determine whether one’s ideals and behavior aligned. The university was not a place for learned would-be prophets. It was a place, rather, for free inquiry and the forms of moral education consistent with that primary freedom.

Confronted with wartime censorship—this after decades of amped-up pressure on academia from a state looking for industrial advantages in the here-and-now—and beholding professors taking it upon themselves to produce patriotic scholarship, Weber doubled down on his defense of the intellectual integrity of schools dedicated to the free pursuit of knowledge. Academic freedom was something—the one thing—scholars had to preserve above all else, and not only because of how it functioned as a social good. Without it, science would be just a job, not a vocation, and a pretty miserable one at that, given the institutional conditions of most scholars. The primary value the university should require its students to hold in common, beyond basic civility, was that of free systematic inquiry.

Although Weber underlined the distinction between facts and values, which in its turn is associated with the prizing apart of scientific and moral education, he was not trying simply to pit systematic scholarship against religion or faith-based moral values. Nor was he looking to establish a hierarchy, with the pure realm of value-neutral science and scholarship standing above attempts to shape or advance values. Following



Nietzsche, Weber regarded the latter endeavors as being of “earthshattering” importance. The mediation of values should be treated with all due seriousness. And scholars who donned the authority of expertise and specialized knowledge to propagate their own ultimate values in the lecture hall did not take this process seriously enough.

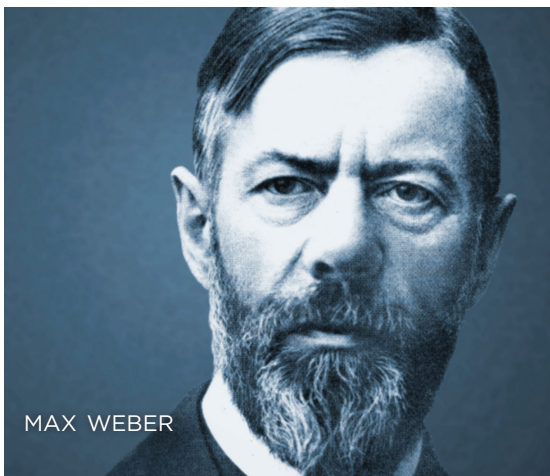
Insisting on the irreducibility of “ultimate ideals” to scientific calculations was also Weber’s attempt to protect the integrity of scholarly practice and protect science from itself. After all, science was the great agent of disenchantment, as Weber saw it, but science itself needed nonrational values. Both science in general and the particular questions scholars asked derived their meaning from ideals, interests, and a “passion” that science couldn’t ground on its own.

In Weber’s account, universities could not impart comprehensive visions of the good, the true, and the beautiful in the way Allan Bloom wanted them to. In a modern age, they were simply incapable of forming human beings on their own without sacrificing gains in knowledge and the freedom that had led to those gains as well as to a complex, compartmentalized structure. Yet in *Science as a Vocation*, Weber often reduced moral commitments and forms of life to “ultimate personal decisions” (“*letzten*

*Entscheidungen*”) that one could make on one’s own at, if not exactly in, the university. He reduced values, ideals, and moral commitments to personal decisions, thereby overemphasizing the capacity of individuals to forge their own ideals and ultimate ends.

This move represented something of a wish fulfillment, since Weber himself subscribed to the not unconventional view that intellectual “manliness” consisted in displaying an intrepid capacity to decide. Never mind that his own work on the transmission of values didn’t fully cohere with such an outlook. In *Science as a Vocation*, the university became a singular site of moral decisionism, almost as though students arrived ready to form themselves.<sup>21</sup> But students came—and continue to come—into classrooms with ideals and values from myriad sources: families, religious traditions, peers, consumer cultures, and media.

Perhaps it was strategic considerations even more than wishful thinking that led Weber to overlook the psychological implausibility of his argument. By describing the moral lives of students primarily in terms of sheer and almost punctual choice, he sought to protect them from prophetic professors, to claim for them the necessary space, as he put it, to craft their own moral lives. After all, Weber had long battled academics



MAX WEBER



ALLAN BLOOM

Left: Wikimedia Commons; right: Zwicky Institute, Zug, Switzerland.

who openly served the interests of the state, as well as more charismatic figures from the circle around the poet Stefan George, whose members included his critic Kahler.

Weber himself wasn't short on charismatic appeal. He was physically fragile—afflicted with a nervous condition that often left him debilitated—yet fearless in debate. He campaigned boldly, even recklessly, for what he held to be right, taking on powerful figures, such as Germany's longtime minister of education Friedrich Althoff, whom others tiptoed around. Weber was, as well, a progressive on many issues especially those that appealed to his strong nationalist streak. And after World War I, he evidently violated his own stricture against political indoctrination in the classroom, so great was his disgust over the Treaty of Versailles.

### *The Politics of Value-Neutrality*

There is, of course, a politics to the ideal of value-neutrality. Weber's notion of value-neutrality lends itself to being used to make any scholarship with radical political implications, however solid it may be, seem dubious. And yet, as Robert Proctor has also observed, critiques of a Weberian value-neutrality have done little to alter the canonical status of *Science as a Vocation* and its arguments for value-neutrality, especially in the social sciences.<sup>22</sup> When, in early 2017, the acclaimed political theorist Danielle Allen defended herself against the charge of being an activist teacher at Harvard, she spoke in classic Weberian terms: "I strongly distinguish values-based analysis from partisan deliberation and never advocate partisan positions in class."<sup>23</sup>

Melancholy mandarins have long misrepresented the connection between the research university and moral education, often invoking Weber only to dismiss him. One hundred years after Weber delivered *Science as a Vocation*, we find it more timely than ever.

Though some of Bloom's more histrionic formulations might have indicated otherwise in 1987, when he published his bestseller, and even as recently as 2014, when Deresiewicz published his, the world order seemed fairly intact. Such is no longer the case; our moment is in some ways closer to 1917 than it is to 1987. And the sense of dissolution it has brought, of the overturning of core, stabilizing civic values and the fragility of our institutions, has prompted higher-education leaders to tack away from Weberian ideals and consider reclaiming traditional moral education for the research university.

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In her commencement address a year ago, the president of Harvard, still a bellwether in American higher education, spoke bluntly of her fears stemming from "the tumultuous state of American politics." Then Drew Gilpin Faust told the class of 2016, "With the rise of the research university in the late nineteenth and early twentieth 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."<sup>24</sup>

The high-minded road of moral education is fraught with dangers and dead-ends, and not only because it can lead to a lot of infighting: Which moral traditions and values could faculty, administrators, alumni, and students agree upon, other than the ones they already promote through the ethos and practice of free inquiry? Nor is it the problem that value-based and fact-based

discussions might be conflated in the classroom; depending on the topic, this comingling can be nearly impossible to avoid.

Rather, making “responsibilities to values” into a curricular centerpiece and pursuing a more comprehensive moral commitment could imperil academic freedom, which is grounded, as Weber reminds us, not in political guarantees of freedom of expression but in the ideals of the research university and the very idea of knowledge that sustains it. Stray from these ideals and the moral commitments consistent with them, and the justification for academic freedom and, thus, the university, will suffer.

Like Weber in 1917, we face forces threatening traditional democratic values. These same forces also put enormous pressure on academic freedom. And so our justifications for it and, thus, our universities, should be as strong as possible. Over the past two years, distrust in American institutions of higher learning has increased dramatically, and academic freedom has come to be associated with the idea that professors should be able to publish incendiary political tweets without risking job termination or even censure by their employers. Despite her Weberian commitment to value-neutrality, Danielle Allen herself reinforced this conflation of academic and political freedom, writing “I treasure academic freedom but also believe that teachers should avoid politicizing the classroom,”<sup>25</sup> wording that, with its adversative turn (“but also believe”), implies that *the norm* for academic freedom is to protect such politicizing. Thinking carefully about academic freedom, and especially about the relationship between moral education and the research imperative, won’t assuage the academy’s more vociferous critics. Nor will it, in the short run, help scholars like Allen, whose very freedom of expression is now being threatened by a campaign of vicious intimidation. But it might well help the universities that employ the victims of right-wing “watch lists” avoid steps

toward moral education based on faulty narratives that would make academic freedom and universities more difficult to defend.

In the end, Bloom himself may have decided that the best place for a moral education of the kind he admired, one that disabuses students of conventional beliefs and imparts a comprehensive philosophy of life, was outside the modern university. What we “should never forget” and “must know” as we try to “defend the university,” he writes in the penultimate paragraph of *The Closing of the American Mind*, is that “Socrates was not a professor.”

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**Like Weber in 1917, we face forces threatening traditional democratic values.**

**These same forces also put enormous pressure on academic freedom.**

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And so Bloom leaves us with the question of whether we could imagine or would want a university organized around a modern-day Socrates. Bloom doesn’t say. But he repeatedly stresses the implacable hostility of “modern science” to Socrates, and so gives readers who share his ideals little cause for optimism. Bloom concludes his book by asserting that moral education and the research university as it currently exists are a bad fit. This is a (false) truism that has been repeated many times over the past thirty years. And in the form in which Bloom and his more progressive admirer Deresiewicz frame it, the claim is particularly misleading, as misleading as the idea that there need not be any tension between traditional moral education and the research imperative. Whatever its faults, Weber’s *Science as a Vocation* provides a corrective to both views. In these particularly difficult times for alma mater, university presidents who are of a mind to act on the latter view would do well to read Weber’s speech of a century ago.



## Notes

- 1 William Deresiewicz, "Don't Send Your Kid to the Ivy League," *New Republic*, July 21, 2014, <https://newrepublic.com/article/118747/ivy-league-schools-are-overrated-send-your-kids-elsewhere>.
- 2 Roger Kimball, "The Groves of Ignorance" (review of *The Closing of the American Mind*), *New York Times*, April 5, 1987, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/04/05/books/the-groves-of-ignorance.html?mcubz=1>; George F. Will, "A How-To Book for the Independent," *Washington Post*, July 30, 1987, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1987/07/30/a-how-to-book-for-the-independent/5dd0f510-81cb-4d4b-a0ba-8fe599b1d41f/?utm\\_term=.23dbbddf97bd](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1987/07/30/a-how-to-book-for-the-independent/5dd0f510-81cb-4d4b-a0ba-8fe599b1d41f/?utm_term=.23dbbddf97bd).
- 3 Colin Campbell, "The Tyranny of the Yale Critics," *New York Times*, February 9, 1986, <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/02/09/magazine/the-tyranny-of-the-yale-critics.html?pagewanted=all&mcubz=1>.
- 4 William Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 156.
- 5 Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 177.
- 6 Roger L. Geiger, "Demography and Curriculum: The Humanities in American Higher Education from the 1950s through the 1980s," in *The Humanities and the Dynamics of Inclusion since World War II*, ed. David A. Hollinger (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 2006), 64.
- 7 Over the past several years, humanities professors have often consoled themselves with statistics suggesting that university enrollments in traditional humanities departments basically reached a steady state in the 1970s and that current enrollments are, relative to increases in the broader number of enrolled students, generally stable. But more recent analysis by Benjamin Schmidt of Northeastern University shows that humanities enrollments in departments such as English and history at top-thirty universities have, in fact, declined in more recent years. For an expanded project on these numbers, see Schmidt, <http://benschmidt.org/Degrees/>.
- 8 Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 342.
- 9 Max Weber, *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe*, eds. Horst Baier et al., Hochschulwesen und Wissenschaftspolitik. I/13. (Tübingen, Germany: J.C.B. Mohr, 1984), 398.
- 10 Wilhelm von Humboldt, "On the Internal Structure of the University in Berlin and its Relationship to Other Organizations," in *Rise of the Research University: A Sourcebook*, eds. Louis Menand, Paul Reitter, and Chad Wellmon (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 109.
- 11 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Anti-Education*, trans. Damion Searls, eds. Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon, (New York, NY: New York Review Books, 2015), 18.
- 12 See Julie Reuben, "The Changing Contours of Moral Education in American Colleges and Universities," in *Debating Moral Education: Rethinking the Role of the Modern University*, eds. Elizabeth Kiss and J. Peter Euben (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010): 27–54.
- 13 *General Education in a Free Society: Report of the Harvard Committee* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), 83.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 80.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 65.
- 16 William Deresiewicz, "The Neoliberal Arts: How College Sold Its Soul to the Market," *Harper's*, September 2015.
- 17 See Stephen Turner, "Blind Spot? Weber's Concept of Expertise and the Perplexing Case of China," in *Max Weber Matters: Interweaving Past and Present*, eds. Fanon Howell, Marisol Lopez Menendez, and David Chalcraft (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2008), 121–34.
- 18 Max Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf* (Stuttgart, Germany: Reclam, 1995), 49.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 42.
- 20 Ernst Krieck quoted in Richard Pohle, *Max Weber und die Krise der Wissenschaft: Eine Debatte in Weimar* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 65–66.
- 21 Seyla Benhabib, "Rationality and Social Action: Critical Reflections on Weber's Methodological Writings," *Philosophical Forum* 12 (1981), 369.
- 22 Robert N. Proctor, *Value-Free Science? Purity and Power in Modern Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).
- 23 Danielle S. Allen, "A Report from the Frontlines of the Free Speech Wars," *Harvard Crimson*, May 1, 2017, <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2017/5/1/allen-report-frontline-speech/>.
- 24 Drew Gilpin Faust, "2016 Commencement Speech," Harvard University, May 26, 2016, <http://www.harvard.edu/president/speech/2016/2016-commencement-speech>.
- 25 Danielle S. Allen, "A Report from the Frontlines."