

## Newman's Idea of a University and its Relevance for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Ian Ker

---

**Abstract:** *John Henry Newman's The Idea of a University remains a classic work on university education, famous for its advocacy of a "liberal education" as the principal purpose of a university. But what Newman meant by a liberal education has often been misinterpreted. In this paper, the author addresses a number of those aspects of Newman's thought which are often misunderstood, including Newman's understanding of the purposes and useful functions of liberal education, the place of research in Newman's idea of a university, and Newman's incorporation of aspects of the pattern of the University of Louvain in his idea of university and its governance.*<sup>1</sup>

---

**Key Words:** John Henry Newman; The Idea of a University; liberal education; university research and teaching

---

**I**n 1863 Newman wrote, "from first to last, education ... has been my line."<sup>2</sup> His career at Oxford had begun with his election in 1822 to a fellowship at Oriel College, "at that time the object of ambition of all rising men in Oxford." After that he "never wished anything better or higher than ... 'to live and die a fellow of Oriel.'"<sup>3</sup> In fact, the Oxford or Tractarian Movement might never have begun but for Newman's dispute with the Provost of Oriel over the role of a college tutor, Newman wanting, as a pioneer of the Oxford tutorial system that was to develop later, a more direct, personal teaching relationship with undergraduates. As a result of being deprived of his tutorship, his teaching career at Oxford—in which his "heart was wrapped up"—came to an end, and he turned to research into the Church Fathers and the history of the early Church. After becoming a Catholic, he was opposed to the restoration of the English hierarchy on the ground that "we want seminaries far more than sees. We want education."<sup>4</sup> So when the chance came of helping to found the Catholic University of Ireland in Dublin, he jumped at it, since he had "from the very first month of my Catholic existence ... wished for a Catholic University." Later, he was naturally attracted by the idea of founding the Oratory School in Birmingham; as an educational work, it fell "under those objects, to which I have especially given my time and thought." And as an old man of sixty-three, he so enjoyed filling in for an absent teacher that he declared that, "if I could believe it to be God's will, [I] would turn away my thoughts from ever writing anything, and should see, in the superintendence of these boys,

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was given by Rev Dr Ian Ker as a public lecture organised by Australian Catholic University in Sydney on 21 February 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article, the author frequently references several quotations together in one footnote. Editor.

<sup>3</sup> *Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Henry Tristram (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1957), 259, 49, 63.

<sup>4</sup> *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, ed. Charles Stephen Dessain *et al.* (London: Nelson, 1961-72; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973-), Vol. XIV, 213. Hereafter cited as *LD*.

the nearest return to my Oxford life." He was proud to claim that the school had "led the way in a system of educational improvement on a large scale through the Catholic community."<sup>5</sup>

## LIBERAL EDUCATION

Newman's *The Idea of a University* (1873) is, like most of his books, an "occasional" work. It is certainly not a systematic treatise. Indeed, it consists of two books: the *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education* (1852), a book which is often confused with *The Idea of a University* and which comprises the lectures Newman was asked to deliver as a prelude to launching the Catholic University of Ireland; and *Lectures and Essays on University Subjects* (1859), a collection of lectures and articles that Newman wrote as the founding president of the university. These *Lectures and Essays* are more practical and less theoretical than the *Discourses* which they usefully supplement.

*The Idea of a University* is still the one classic work on university education. And it is famous for its advocacy of a "liberal education" as the principal purpose of a university. However, the nature of what Newman meant by a liberal education has often been misunderstood. What he calls "special Philosophy" or "Liberal or Philosophical Knowledge" he sees as "the end of University Education," which he defines as "a comprehensive view of truth in all its branches, of the relations of science to science, of their mutual bearings, and their respective values." This can be very misleading to a modern reader who may suppose that what Newman means is that the heart of the curriculum will be courses in philosophy, or alternatively some rather mysterious "special" kind of philosophy. But in reality Newman's "philosophy of an imperial intellect," as he rather grandiloquently terms it in the second half of the *Idea*, is not some super-philosophy but simply what he calls in the Preface to the *Discourses* that "real cultivation of mind" which he defines as "the intellect ... properly trained and formed to have a connected view or grasp of things."<sup>6</sup> This is shown by his definition of this "special Philosophy": "In default of a recognized term, I have called the perfection or virtue of the intellect by the name of philosophy, philosophical knowledge, enlargement of mind, or illumination." By this he does not mean the academic subject we now call philosophy, but "Knowledge ... when it is acted upon, informed ... impregnated by Reason," in other words knowledge which "grasps what it perceives through the senses ... which takes a view of things; which sees more than the senses convey; which reasons upon what it sees, and while it sees; which invests it with an idea." And Newman implicitly acknowledges a rhetorical exaggeration when he remarks, "to have mapped out the Universe is the boast, or at least the ambition, of Philosophy."<sup>7</sup> The fact is that at the heart of his philosophy of education is simply the capacity to *think*.

Another misunderstanding of Newman's idea of a liberal education is that he was advocating the study of the liberal arts for the usual kind of reasons. But it is striking that in his several discussions of literature, for example, in the *Idea* he does not at all stress its cultural value. It is true that he acknowledges that literature is the "history" of man, "his Life and Remains," "the manifestation of human nature in human language." And he also

---

<sup>5</sup> LD xxvi, 58; xix, 464; xxi.51; xxiii, 117.

<sup>6</sup> *The Idea of a University*, ed. I. T. Ker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 10-11. Hereafter cited as *Idea*.

<sup>7</sup> *Idea*, 103-4, 114.

points out that if “the power of speech is a gift as great as any that can be named ... it will not answer to make light of Literature or to neglect its study.” But there is no attempt to argue for the cultural value of studying literature, or even that a knowledge of literature is an essential part of education. What he does argue in his lecture “Christianity and Letters” in the second half of the *Idea* is that traditionally “the Classics, and the subjects of thought and the studies to which they give rise, or ... the Arts, have ever, on the whole, been the instruments of education.” This could be very misleading for a modern reader who will understand by the Classics the languages and literature of ancient Greece and Rome. But in fact Newman is thinking of the seven liberal arts of the medieval university, which, as he explains in the same lecture, comprised grammar, rhetoric, logic, and mathematics, which was subdivided into geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and music. Grammar certainly involved literature, the literature of Greece and Rome, but this education in the arts was hardly what we would mean by an education either in the arts or the Classics. Consequently, when Newman says that these liberal arts were able in the middle ages to withstand the challenge of the new subjects of theology, law, and medicine, because they were “acknowledged, as before, to be the best instruments of mental cultivation, and the best guarantees for intellectual progress”—he is certainly not talking only of about linguistic and literary studies. And when later in the lecture he declares that the “simple question to be considered is, how best to strengthen, refine, and enrich the intellectual powers,” but then goes on to say that “the perusal of the poets, historians, and philosophers of Greece and Rome will accomplish this purpose, as long experience has shown”—he is including the study of Greek mathematics.<sup>8</sup>

Newman himself studied both classics and mathematics at Oxford, and among the set texts for the latter were Euclid and Newton, as well as modern mathematicians.<sup>9</sup> It was quite common then to study both subjects at Oxford, and this combination represented for Newman a continuation of the medieval liberal arts. At the Catholic University of Ireland all students were required to follow a course of liberal studies that included Latin, mathematics, and even science. But since the students were only aged sixteen on entry to the university and this course of liberal arts only lasted for two years, these were in effect the last two years of the secondary education that was presumably not easily available to Catholics in Ireland at the time. Thereafter, it should be noted in view of the common assumption that Newman was only interested in providing a liberal education at the university, that students could proceed immediately to a professional degree such as medicine, although of course they could also proceed to what we could call an arts degree—but even then both mathematics and theology were included in this “Liberal Education.”<sup>10</sup> It is clear that at Newman’s university the medieval concept of the liberal arts was modified by the inclusion of both science and theology.

Newman seems in the *Idea of a University* to equivocate somewhat over both science and theology. On the one hand, he supported in theory the traditional view that the medieval liberal arts were the staple of a liberal education. On the other hand, his actual practice was more flexible. In his lecture “Christianity and Letters,” he considers the contemporary threat from the rise of modern science to the traditional liberal arts,

---

<sup>8</sup> *Idea*, 193-4, 197, 216, 221-2, 245.

<sup>9</sup> See A. Dwight Culler, *The Imperial Intellect: A Study of Newman's Educational Ideal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 16.

<sup>10</sup> See *Idea*, xxv-vi.

wondering whether it can educate the mind as well, since “it is proved to us as yet by no experience whatever.” For “the question is not what department of study contains the more wonderful facts, or promises the more brilliant discoveries, and which is in the higher and which in an inferior rank; but simply which out of all provides the most robust and invigorating discipline for the unformed mind.”<sup>11</sup> The reference to the “rank” of a department of study is clearly a reference to theology, which for Newman is the most important branch of study from the point of view of knowledge, but not of education. Educationally, he is as cautious about theology as he is about science. It seems that he is not maintaining that science and theology are necessarily unfit to be part of a liberal education, but only that they are not part of the essential, core subjects, that is, the traditional liberal arts. Certainly, in the *Discourses* he allows that the study of theology may form part of a liberal education provided it rises above the level of knowledge in the sense of mere information needed for preaching or catechesis. Again, in the last of the *Discourses*, after speaking of the faculty of science, he turns to the faculty of letters, which, he says, constitutes “the other main constituent portion of the subject-matter of Liberal Education.”<sup>12</sup> It looks as if Newman was simply accepting what had come to pass in universities and recognized that the study of science was a perfectly respectable intellectual pursuit. And that after all was all he was concerned about: the “mental cultivation” which results from a proper intellectual “discipline.” For whatever the cultural value inherent in studying certain arts subjects may be, that is not Newman’s primary concern: it is not “culture” in the modern sense of the word that he is concerned with, but rather “mental cultivation” in the sense of the education or training of the mind.

It is not, then, a knowledge and appreciation of the arts that constitutes for Newman the end of a liberal education, desirable, of course, as he would have deemed that to be. But rather, as he states quite unequivocally in the Preface to the *Discourses*, it is that “real cultivation of mind” which enables a person “to have a connected view or grasp of things” and which manifests itself in “good sense, sobriety of thought, reasonableness, candour, self-command, and steadiness of view.” It is “the force, the steadiness, the comprehensiveness and the versatility of intellect, the command over our own powers, the instinctive just estimate of things as they pass before us” that is the object of a liberal education. And this liberal education has a distinctively useful function for it gives its recipient the “faculty of entering with comparative ease into any subject of thought, and of taking up with aptitude any science or profession.” Far from Newman’s “science of sciences” or “Philosophy” being a special subject of study, a kind of super-general science which embraces all the other branches of knowledge, it is not a subject you can study at all, but rather it is by learning to think properly that one is “gradually initiated into the largest and truest philosophical views.” The more the mind is formed and trained, the more “philosophical” in Newman’s sense it becomes.<sup>13</sup>

Because Newman thinks that “Liberal Education ... is simply the cultivation of the intellect ... and its object is nothing more or less than intellectual excellence,” he regrets the fact that there is no recognized English word to express the idea of intellectual cultivation or the cultivated intellect:

---

<sup>11</sup> *Idea*, 221-2.

<sup>12</sup> *Idea*, 193.

<sup>13</sup> *Idea*, 10-13, 57.

It were well if the English, like the Greek language, possessed some definite word to express, simply and generally, intellectual proficiency or perfection, such as "health," as used with reference to the animal frame, and "virtue," with reference to our moral nature. I am not able to find such a term;—talent, ability, genius, belong distinctly to the raw material, which is the subject-matter, not to that excellence which is the result of exercise and training. When we turn, indeed, to the particular kinds of intellectual perfection, words are forthcoming for our purpose, as, for instance, judgment, taste, and skill; yet even these belong, for the most part, to powers or habits bearing upon practice or upon art, and not to any perfect condition of the intellect, considered in itself. Wisdom, again, is certainly a more comprehensive word than any other, but it has a direct relation to conduct, and to human life. Knowledge, indeed, and Science express purely intellectual ideas, but still not a state or quality of the intellect; for knowledge, in its ordinary sense, is but one of its circumstances, denoting a possession or a habit; and science has been appropriated to the subject-matter of the intellect, instead of belonging in English, as it ought to do, to the intellect itself.<sup>14</sup>

Now surprise has been expressed that "Newman does not meet the want of 'some definite word' with the word 'culture.'" Elsewhere, he in fact made the essential connexion with 'culture.'<sup>15</sup> In the passage referred to, Newman does indeed speak of "intellectual culture," but it is synonymous with what he calls "the culture of the intellect," whereby the intellect is "exercised in order to its perfect state." Certainly Matthew Arnold, from whom the word *culture* in its modern sense derives, did not define culture as a state of "intellectual perfection," but rather as "a pursuit of our total perfection." The word *culture* for Arnold not only meant a "pursuit" rather than a "state," but its connotations are not even primarily, let alone exclusively, intellectual: "culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know ... the best which has been thought and said in the world."<sup>16</sup> This no doubt is what is generally meant by a liberal education, but it is not what Newman meant: for him "intellectual culture" did not mean reading "great books," but learning how to think. Newman's failure, then, to use the word *culture* was not an oversight on his part because the word did not signify what he had in mind, which he was forced to describe thus: "In default of a recognized term, I have called the perfection or virtue of the intellect by the name of philosophy, philosophical knowledge, enlargement of mind, or illumination."<sup>17</sup>

The training of the mind for Newman does not consist either in studying logic (though it may include that) or in the study of "how to think": one learns to think not by learning a science of thinking but by thinking about the ordinary objects of knowledge. This is why, Newman says, "philosophy presupposes knowledge" and "requires a great deal of reading," for knowledge "is the indispensable condition of expansion of mind, and the instrument of attaining to it." But the knowledge is strictly distinguished from the philosophy: merely to know is not to be educated.

The enlargement consists, not merely in the passive reception into the mind of a number of ideas hitherto unknown to it, but in the mind's energetic and simultaneous action upon and towards and among those new ideas, which are rushing in upon it. ... There is no enlargement, unless there be a comparison of ideas one with another, as they come before the mind, and a systematizing of them. ... It is not the mere addition to

---

<sup>14</sup> *Idea*, 113.

<sup>15</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 110-11.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy with Friendship's Garland and Some Literary Essays*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), 233.

<sup>17</sup> *Idea*, 114.

our knowledge that is the illumination; but the locomotion, the movement onwards, of that mental centre, to which both what we know, and what we are learning, the accumulating mass of our acquirements, gravitates.<sup>18</sup>

This enlargement of mind reaches its highest point in “a truly great intellect,” which “possesses the knowledge, not only of things, but also of their mutual and true relations.”

That only is true enlargement of mind which is the power of viewing many things at once as one whole, of referring them severally to their true place in the universal system, of understanding their respective values, and determining their mutual dependence. ... Possessed of this real illumination, the mind never views any part of the extended subject-matter of Knowledge without recollecting that it is but a part, or without the associations which spring from this recollection. It makes everything in some sort lead to everything else; it would 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.

Newman's “Philosopher” is not a “genius,” originating “vast ideas or dazzling projects.” For “genius ... is the exhibition of a natural gift, which no culture can teach, at which no Institution can aim.” On the other hand, the “perfection of the intellect,” which is the aim of a liberal education, “is the clear, calm, accurate vision and comprehension of all things, as far as the finite mind can embrace them, each in its place, and with its own characteristics upon it.” The mind of a genius is “possessed with some one object,” takes “exaggerated views of its own importance,” is “feverish in the pursuit of it,” and makes “it the measure of things which are utterly foreign to it.” By contrast, the liberally educated mind, “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 but be patient, collected, and majestically calm.”<sup>19</sup>

Newman is emphatic that acquisition of knowledge is not the same as education. To “improve the intellect, first of all, we must ascend; we cannot gain real knowledge on a level; we must generalize, we must reduce to method, we must have a grasp of principles, and group and shape our acquisitions by means of them.” Memory can be “over-stimulated,” so that “reason acts almost as feebly and madly as in the madman,” when the mind is “the prey ... of barren facts, of random intrusions from without.” The “practical error, he complains, of modern education is, “not to load the memory of the student with a mass of undigested knowledge, but to force upon him so much that he has rejected it all. It has been the error of distracting and enfeebling the mind by an unmeaning profusion of subjects; of implying that a smattering in a dozen branches of study is not shallowness, which it really is, but enlargement, which it is not ...” And Newman makes it clear that he prefers specialization to a general course of studies if there has to be a choice between a “thorough knowledge of one science” and “a superficial acquaintance with many,” for “a smattering of a hundred things” does not lead to a “philosophical or comprehensive view” (any more than does mere “memory for detail”). Long before the arrival of the internet, Newman is very aware of the dangers of modern technology that makes information available on a scale unknown before: “What the steam engine does with matter, the printing press is to do with mind; it is to act mechanically, and the population is to be

---

<sup>18</sup> *Idea*, 116-7, 120-1.

<sup>19</sup> *Idea*, 122-4.

passively, almost unconsciously enlightened, by the mere multiplication and dissemination of volumes." The opposite of the mechanical is the "individual" element—"the power of initiation"—that Newman regards as essential to education. For one can only become educated by actively using one's own mind oneself as opposed to passively absorbing information: "Learning is to be without exertion, without attention, without toil; without grounding, without advance, without finishing." It is not that Newman is opposed to the spread of popular education through "the cheap publication of scientific and literary works, which is now in vogue," and as for that "superficial" general knowledge "which periodical literature and occasional lectures and scientific institutions diffuse through the community," he accepts that it is even "a necessary accomplishment, in the case of educated men." What he does not accept is that such a proliferation of information actually educates people: "accomplishments are not education" for they do not "form or cultivate the intellect."<sup>20</sup>

By the training of the mind to think Newman is not only referring to the ability to think clearly and logically. A liberal education for him means the education of the whole mind. What he calls the "cultivation of the intellect" or the "scientific formation of mind" is certainly intended to result in the ability to "grasp things as they are" and the "power of discriminating between truth and falsehood"; but it also includes the capacity "of arranging things according to their real value." It is not only a matter of "clear-sightedness," since the "sagacity" or "wisdom" which the educated person is meant to possess involves too "an acquired faculty of judgment." In other words, the power of evaluating and making normative judgments is also a part of the educational process. Far from the mind only consisting in the logical faculty, Newman warns that just "as some member or organ of the body may be inordinately used and developed, so may memory, or imagination, or the reasoning faculty." And "*this*," he insists, "is not intellectual culture." But rather, "as the body may be tended, cherished, and exercised with a simple view to its general health, so may the intellect also be generally exercised in order to its perfect state; and this is its cultivation." The ideal recipient of this holistic liberal education knows "where he and his science stand" because "he has come to it, as it were, from a height, he has taken a survey of all knowledge ... and he treats his own in consequence with a philosophy and a resource, which belongs not to the study itself, but to his liberal education." But clarity and judgment are not the only fruits of a liberal education, which "gives a man a clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them." Articulate expression and imagination, for example, are also fostered by a liberal education.<sup>21</sup>

## THE UNIVERSITY

Newman does not see the teachers as alone responsible for the liberal education of students. On the contrary, he sees the students themselves as part of the teaching process. This is why the residential side of a college or university is so important to him. And to make his point in an extreme way he contrasts the new London University which "dispensed with residence and tutorial superintendence," giving "its degrees to any person who passed an examination," with the Oxford of the eighteenth century which is said to have "merely brought a number of young men together for three or four years, and then

---

<sup>20</sup> *Idea*, 125-8.

<sup>21</sup> *Idea*, 134-5, 145-6, 154.

sent them away.” And he says flatly, “if I were asked which of these two methods were the better discipline of the intellect ... if I must determine which of the two courses was the more successful in training, moulding, enlarging the mind ... I have no hesitation in giving the preference to that University which did nothing, over that which exacted of its members an acquaintance with every science under the sun.” Of course, part of Newman’s preference lies in the fact that London University did not profess to offer a coherent liberal education and also lacked the tutorial system with its close contact between teachers and taught; but in addition a non-residential university does not provide the kind of intellectual community that Newman deemed necessary for a truly liberal education: “When a multitude of young men ... come together and freely mix with each other, they are sure to learn from one another, even if there be no one to teach them; the conversation of all is a series of lectures to each, and they gain for themselves new ideas and views, fresh matter of thought, and distinct principles for judging and acting ...” Such a teacher-less university, Newman dares to maintain, is preferable to a non-residential university that offers no liberal education or the personal contact between students and teachers:

Here then is a real teaching ... it at least tends towards cultivation of the intellect; it at least recognizes that knowledge is something more than a sort of passive reception of scraps and details; it is a something, and it does a something, which never will issue from the most strenuous efforts of a set of teachers, with no mutual sympathies and no intercommunion, of a set of examiners with no opinions which they dare profess, and with no common principles, who are teaching or questioning a set of youths who do not know them, and do not know each other, on a large number of subjects, different in kind, and connected by no wide philosophy.

A university or college where there is a “youthful community,” even if there is no proper teaching, gives birth to “a living teaching” or “tradition.” And such a “self-education” offers to the students “more philosophy, more true enlargement” than the impersonal lectures of a non-residential university offer students “forced to load their minds with a score of subjects against an examination, who have too much on their hands to indulge themselves in thinking or investigation, who devour premiss and conclusion together with indiscriminate greediness, who hold whole sciences on faith.” It would be better for an “independent mind ... to range through a library at random, taking down books as they meet him, and pursuing the trains of thought which his mother wit suggests!” Even such private studies would provide a “more genuine” education.<sup>22</sup>

Naturally Newman did not think that such a university was the ideal one. On the contrary, as he states at the beginning of the Preface to the *Discourses*, “a University ... is a place of teaching universal knowledge,” its “object” being “the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than the advancement”: “If its object were scientific and philosophical discovery, I do not see why a University should have students.”<sup>23</sup> Now if Newman were a systematic kind of writer and the *Idea of a University* a systematic treatise on education, he would at this point have made the qualification that he goes on to make with regard to the other possible object of a university which he wishes to counter. But because Newman is not writing in the abstract but in the context of a very concrete and controversial situation he musters all the resources of his rhetoric. For the fact of the matter is that Newman’s opening insistence that a university is necessarily an institution for teaching is a rhetorical

---

<sup>22</sup> *Idea*, 129-32.

<sup>23</sup> *Idea*, 5.



device to introduce the crucial point he really wants to make in the heavily clerical context of Catholic Dublin and Ireland.

For the burning issue was not about teaching *versus* research, but about whether the Irish bishops really wanted a university at all, or whether as many lay Catholics (for whom the University was intended and who were being asked to pay for it) suspected, the hierarchy in fact had in mind a kind of glorified seminary where Catholics could be shielded from the malign influences of both Protestant Trinity College, Dublin and the newly founded secular Queen's Colleges. Archbishop Cullen of Dublin had asked Newman to justify a Catholic university and the teaching of Catholic theology; for his part Newman was determined to make it crystal clear that it was a university he was founding, a university like those non-Catholic universities that Catholics were to be protected from. And so, although he italicises both "teaching" and "knowledge" in his opening proposition, it is really the latter that he wants to emphasise, which is perhaps why the next sentence explaining his thesis reverses the order of the preceding sentence by stressing not "teaching" but "knowledge": "This implies that its object is, on the one hand, intellectual, not moral; and, on the other hand, that it is the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than the advancement." True, the succeeding and final sentence of the paragraph returns to the original order: "If its object were scientific and philosophical discovery, I do not see why a University should have students; if religious training, I do not see how it can be the seat of literature and science." But the fact is that nobody in Ireland or England was suggesting that universities should be research rather than teaching institutions, nor did Newman foresee that what he intended as a merely "academic" point, to balance the real point he wanted to make, would much later become a source of reproach. For if there is one thing that educationists think they know about Newman's *Idea of a University*, it is that the book is hostile to research. In fact, a few pages later in the Preface Newman, while again insisting that the "great object" of a university must be education, adds, however, "and not simply to protect the interests and advance the dominion of Science." Research, then, is not, after all, apparently to be excluded from the university. Indeed, in the sixth Discourse "research" is called an end in itself and a "liberal" pursuit. For Newman's concern is to argue that a university is for education, not as opposed to research, but as opposed to moral and spiritual formation. That said, however, it is undeniable that, as he points out, an institution solely devoted to research and without any students to teach is better suited for research than a university, even a modern "research university", which still has to teach students. For a university without students is a contradiction in terms, whereas a university where no research is carried out can still call itself a university. But far from research not being the business of a university, Newman actually thought the opposite, as he makes clear in a lecture in the second half of the *Idea of a University* where he is no longer preoccupied with establishing that a university is not a seminary. There he states unequivocally: "What an empire is in political history, such is a University in the sphere of ... research."<sup>24</sup> But because the *Discourses* are often equated with the *Idea of a University* and the second half of the book is not read, this ringing endorsement of the place of research in the university is unknown to educational writers.

Newman's actual practice at the Catholic University of Ireland was totally consistent with this. Unable to carry out all his objectives during his frustrated presidency, he nevertheless set out plans for research institutes in science, technology, archaeology, and

---

<sup>24</sup> *Idea*, 9, 370.

medicine, "institutions," he declared, "which will have their value intrinsically, whether students are present or not." His categorical insistence on the research duties of the University's professors would at the time have caused some surprise at his own old University of Oxford, where the professors were not unduly given either to teaching or to research prior to the reforms of 1854. And he founded a "literary and scientific journal" called the *Atlantis* "for depositing professorial work."<sup>25</sup> Corresponding to the colleges at Oxford were collegiate houses headed by priests with tutors who were, like the fellows of Oxford colleges then, unmarried graduates. These tutors and fellows were not permanent members of the teaching staff and would leave on getting married. But while Newman wished to preserve the collegiate, tutorial dimension in Dublin, he also wanted to supplement it with the university and professorial dimension which was then very weak at Oxford.

To deal with another common misunderstanding, Newman had no intention of simply setting up a replica of Oxford in Dublin, but he was clear that the constitution of the new university should be modelled upon "the pattern of the University of Louvain."<sup>26</sup> This was not only because the recently founded Belgian university provided a model for a Catholic university, but because it offered a continental corrective to the Oxford collegiate system. For the originality of Newman's conception of his university was that it would combine the advantages of both systems: that is, he wanted a "University seated and living in Colleges," which he hoped would be "a perfect institution, as possessing excellences of opposite kinds." Given that he thought that "the critical evil in the present state of the English Universities" was, "not that the Colleges are strong, but that the University has no practical or real jurisdiction over them,"<sup>27</sup> it is not surprising that in Dublin he ensured that, as at Louvain, the government of the University lay in the hands of the president and professors rather than the heads of the collegiate houses. And it is surely the case that Newman's concern was not only with effective administration but also with the quality of teaching *and* the need for research in a university.

In the second of the *Discourses*, Newman repeats his point in the Preface that a university "by its very name professes to teach universal knowledge," that is, "all branches of knowledge." This would seem impractical, not to say undesirable. But Newman should not be taken too literally. The Catholic University of Ireland did not teach, nor did it aspire to teach, all conceivable branches of knowledge. Newman's point is that a university should in principle be open to teaching anything that is knowable: "all branches of knowledge are, at least implicitly, the subject-matter of its teaching." It should not refuse to do so on some discriminatory ground "through the systematic omission of any one science." Clearly some subjects were more important and some indispensable. But in principle, a university must be hospitable to any kind of genuine knowledge. He corrects any misunderstanding in an explanatory appendix to the *Discourses*: "Though I have spoken of a University as a place for cultivating all knowledge, yet this does not imply that in matter of fact a particular University might not be deficient in this or that branch, or that it might not give especial attention to one branch over the rest; but only that all branches of knowledge were presupposed or implied, and none omitted on principle."

---

<sup>25</sup> William Neville, ed., *My Campaign in Ireland*, Part I (privately printed, 1896), 96-7, 110-11.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 58.

<sup>27</sup> *Historical Sketches* (London: Longmans, Green, 1872), vol. III, 229, 235.

There must be no restrictions reflecting any ideological conceptions of the range of human knowledge: "For instance, are we to limit our idea of University Knowledge by the evidence of our senses? then we exclude ethics; by intuition? we exclude history; by testimony? we exclude metaphysics; by abstract reasoning? we exclude physics." Instead, Newman insists not only on the fullness but on the wholeness and unity of knowledge:

All that exists, as contemplated by the human mind, forms one large system or complex fact, and this of course resolves itself into an indefinite number of particular facts, which, as being portions of a whole, have countless relations of every kind, one towards another. Knowledge is the apprehension of these facts, whether in themselves, or in their mutual positions and bearings. And, as all taken together form one integral subject for contemplation, so there are no natural or real limits between part and part; one is ever running into another; all, as viewed by the mind, are combined together, and possess a correlative character one with another.

The reason why "all knowledge forms one whole" is that

Its subject-matter is one; for the universe in its length and breadth is so intimately knit together, that we cannot separate off portion from portion, and operation from operation, except by a mental abstraction. ... Next, sciences are the results of that mental abstraction ... being the logical record of this or that aspect of the whole subject-matter of knowledge. As they all belong to one and the same circle of objects, they are one and all connected together; as they are but aspects of things, they are severally incomplete in their relation to the things themselves, though complete in their own idea and for their own respective purposes; on both accounts they at once need and subserve each other.

A university will not in practice teach every conceivable branch of knowledge, but in theory it must be open to doing so, for if they "all relate to one and the same integral subject-matter ... none can safely be omitted, if we would obtain the exactest knowledge possible of things as they are, and ... the omission is more or less important, in proportion to the field which each covers, and the depth to which it penetrates, and the order to which it belongs; for its loss is a positive privation of an influence which exerts itself in the correction and completion of the rest."<sup>28</sup>

Newman's view of the interaction and interdependence of the various branches of knowledge is important both for his idea of a university as an institution and for his conception of a liberal education. His conviction of the integrity of knowledge makes him sensitive to the danger of one branch of knowledge intruding into the sphere of another. Different branches of knowledge "differ in importance; and according to their importance will be their influence, not only on the mass of knowledge to which they all converge and contribute, but on each other." And the danger is that specialists in a particular branch of knowledge that is important may become "bigots and quacks, scorning all principles and reported facts which do not belong to their own pursuit." For in the "whole circle of sciences, one corrects another for purposes of fact, and one without the other cannot dogmatize, except hypothetically and upon its own abstract principles." Against the tendency of whatever branch of knowledge at any given time to regard itself as the key to all knowledge Newman insists that each branch of knowledge only studies its own aspect of reality. And he emphasises that the neglect or omission of any branch of knowledge,

---

<sup>28</sup> *Idea*, 33, 57, 183, 38, 52, 57.

particularly if it is important and likely to impinge on other branches, does not mean that that subject simply slips out of the totality of knowledge—for

If you drop any science out of the circle of knowledge, you cannot keep its place vacant for it; that science is forgotten; the other sciences close up, or, in other words, they exceed their proper bounds, and intrude where they have no right. For instance, I suppose, if ethics were went into banishment, its territory would soon disappear, under a treaty of partition, as it may be called, between law, political economy, and physiology.

The more ignorant the specialist in a particular subject is the more likely they are to be tempted by academic imperialism:

In proportion to the narrowness of his knowledge, is, not his distrust of it, but the deep hold it has upon him, his absolute conviction of his own conclusions, and his positiveness in maintaining them. ... Thus he becomes, what is commonly called, a man of one idea; which properly means a man of one science, and of the view, partly true, but subordinate, partly false, which is all that can proceed out of anything so partial. Hence it is that we have the principles of utility, of combination, of progress, of philanthropy, or, in material sciences, comparative anatomy, phrenology, electricity, exalted into leading ideas, and keys, if not of all knowledge, at least of many things more than belong to them.

Such narrow specialists “have made their own science ... the centre of all truth, and view every part or the chief parts of knowledge as if developed from it, and to be tested and determined by its principles.”<sup>29</sup>

No subject is competent to evaluate its own importance as a branch of knowledge: for example, “if there is a science of wealth, it must give rules for gaining wealth and disposing of wealth,” but it “can do nothing more; it cannot itself declare that it is a subordinate science.” For the economist has no business “to recommend the science of wealth, by claiming for it an ethical quality, viz., by extolling it as the road to virtue and happiness.” Such an evaluation must either come from one of those branches of knowledge whose province it is to deal with ethical and teleological questions or it must be made not by any particular branch of knowledge but by the “philosophical” mind trained by a liberal education:

The objection that Political Economy is inferior to the science of virtue, or does not conduce to happiness, is an ethical or theological objection; the question of its “rank” belongs to that Architectonic Science or Philosophy, whatever it be, which is itself the arbiter of all truth, and which disposes of the claims and arranges the places of all the departments of knowledge which man is able to master.

Then again, ethical or political questions inevitably impinge on economics because “the various branches of science are intimately connected with each other.” But they cannot be determined by economic criteria, nor should they be covertly settled by the economist’s own private ethical or political views which are quite independent of his economics. The fundamental principle is clearly stated by Newman: “What is true in one science is dictated to us indeed according to that science, but not according to another science, or in another department.” Military science, for example, “must ever be

---

<sup>29</sup> *Idea*, 54-7, 73-4, 76, 81.

subordinate to political considerations or maxims of government, which is a higher science with higher objects.”<sup>30</sup>

The danger of academic imperialism is accentuated when the specialist is working outside the community of a university, because then

he is in danger of being absorbed and narrowed by his pursuit, and of giving Lectures which are the Lectures of nothing more than a lawyer, physician, geologist, or political economist; whereas in a University he will just know where he and his science stand, he has come to it, as it were, from a height, he has taken a survey of all knowledge, he is kept from extravagance by the very rivalry of other studies, he has gained from them a special illumination and largeness of mind and freedom and self-possession, and he treats his own in consequence with a philosophy and a resource, which belongs not to the study itself, but to his liberal education.

Similarly, the student is made aware at a university of other subjects than he happens to be studying: “There is no science but tells a different tale, when viewed as a portion of a whole, from what it is likely to suggest when taken by itself, without the safeguard, as I may call it, of others.” Although Newman would prefer a more specialized education to a general education involving a smattering of knowledge in a number of subjects, there is a danger in specialization or over-specialization: “If his reading is confined simply to one subject ... certainly it has a tendency to contract his mind.” But since “the drift and meaning of a branch of knowledge varies with the company in which it is introduced to the student,” it is important that a student in his studies should be made aware of as many other branches of study as possible. This, then, is the kind of university where a student will gain a liberal education and where his teachers will be saved from academic imperialism:

It is a great point then to enlarge the range of studies which a University professes, even for the sake of the students; and, though they cannot pursue every subject which is open to them, they will be the gainers by living among those and under those who represent the whole circle. ... An assemblage of learned men, zealous for their own sciences, and rivals of each other, are brought, by familiar intercourse and for the sake of intellectual peace, to adjust together the claims and relations of their respective subjects of education. They learn to respect, to consult, to aid each other. Thus is created a pure and clear atmosphere of thought, which the student also breathes, though in his own case he only pursues a few sciences out of the multitude. He profits by an intellectual tradition, which is independent of particular teachers, which guides him in his choice of subjects, and duly interprets for him those which he chooses. He apprehends the great outlines of knowledge, the principles on which it rests, the scale of its parts, its lights and its shades, its great points and its little, as he otherwise cannot apprehend them. Hence it is that his education is called “liberal.” A habit of mind is formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are, freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom; or what ... I have ventured to call a philosophical habit.<sup>31</sup>

---

**Author:** Rev Dr Ian Ker is Senior Research Fellow in Theology at St Benet's Hall, Oxford University. He is an internationally renowned expert on the life and thought of John Henry Newman and author of his most comprehensive biography, *John Henry Newman: A Biography*, together with numerous books and articles about him. He is also the author of

---

<sup>30</sup> *Idea*, 84, 86-7, 73, 407.

<sup>31</sup> *Idea*, 145-6, 94-6.

*The Catholic Revival in English Literature, 1845-1961* (2003) and an intellectual and literary biography of G. K. Chesterton, also published by Oxford University Press.

Email: [ian.ker@stb.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ian.ker@stb.ox.ac.uk)

---