Liberal Learning and Professional Education in Newman's The Idea of a University

by Don Briel

J.M. Cameron's argument that "modern thinking on university education is a series of footnotes to Newman's lectures and essays,"[1] may strike some today as an exaggeration but it is, I think, quite fair to argue that Newman's educational philosophy has had a major effect on the modern understanding of the nature and role of higher education.

At the same time, Newman's educational theory is rarely well understood, and it is common to see serious misreadings of his major arguments including those which emphasize the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and the intellectual rather than moral end of university teaching. There are two principal sources for these misunderstandings. The first is the dialectical character of Newman's thought which often holds in tension apparently contradictory theses as he works toward a broad synthesis. For example, although it is true that Newman held that the principal end of the university was intellectual rather than moral, he also argued that the Church was necessary to the integrity of the university itself both in its intellectual and moral dimensions, and thus it steadied the university in the performance of its duties, a complex view which resists easy reductions. In addition, as Ian Ker has indicated, in The Idea of a University, Newman indulged a Victorian taste for hyperbole, a characteristic rhetorical feature of his age, but one which often misleads the contemporary reader.[2] As a result, one must be careful in interpreting the elegant prose with which Newman describes the nature of the philosophical habit of liberal knowledge and its relation to learning and professional skill.

Although it is true that a liberal education had long been associated with a tradition of classic texts and disciplines, Newman did not think that liberal education was reducible to them. Rather, "liberal education, viewed in itself, is simply the cultivation of the intellect, as such, and its object is nothing more or less than intellectual excellence."[3] Of course, this is what Newman meant when he spoke of that philosophical habit which is the end of university teaching, the ability to see things as they are and in their true relation. In the preface to The Idea of a University, he argued that a university must by definition teach universal knowledge because all knowledge was interdependent. He later employed the image of the circle of knowledge in which he conveyed a sense of the critical tension which defined the relation of the disciplines constituting the university. Newman was well aware of the consequences for the whole of removing any of its parts because each of the elements of the whole of knowledge both complemented and corrected the remaining parts. He certainly had in mind the then novel

experiment at the University of London in which theology was excluded from the curriculum in order to avoid the religious tests still in place at Oxford and Cambridge. But his concern for a fundamental unity of knowledge, rooted in a Catholic tradition of the complementarity of faith and reason, transcended his specific concerns about the importance of theology in the university curriculum. This concern for the unity of knowledge suggests a difficulty for professional schools with highly specialized curricula but this will not be the only difficulty which may mislead the reader in thinking about Newman's critique of a narrow professional education.

In the fifth discourse, Newman asserted that knowledge is to be pursued for its own sake, and so liberal knowledge is that "which stands on its own pretensions, which is independent of sequel, expects no complement, refuses to be informed (as it is called) by any end, or absorbed in any art, in order duly to present itself to our contemplation."[4] Here we have a hint of that hyperbolic rhetoric which Ker has noted and which reaches perhaps its highest expression in this discourse when Newman concludes, "Not to know the relative disposition of things is the state of slaves or children; to have mapped out the universe is the boast, or at least the ambition, of Philosophy."[5] The pretensions of liberal education, however, do not in themselves lead to a disparagement of applied learning or professional study although it is true that Newman argues that applied or professional disciplines are not the primary ends of university education. Because Newman so strongly argues that the principal task of a university is the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, it is often thought that professional disciplines are by definition excluded from his idea of a university but the fact is otherwise. Perhaps the one real success within the general failure of Newman's Catholic university of Ireland was the medical school. Newman thought that the great danger of professional education, abstracted from a university setting and context, was that it tended to focus on the particular at the expense of the universal. As a result, professional education tended to undermine the broader pursuit of the unity of knowledge at the heart of the university's mission. Nonetheless, Newman conceded that professional skills were increasingly necessary in the complexity of modern economic and political systems:

Let me not be thought to deny the necessity, or to decry the benefit, of such attention to what is particular and practical, as belongs to the useful or mechanical arts; life could not go on without them; we owe our daily welfare to them; their exercise is the duty of the many, and we owe to the many a debt of gratitude for fulfilling that duty. I only say that knowledge as it tends more and more to be particular, ceases to be knowledge.[6]

It might first appear that Newman, while conceding in a somewhat patronizing way the necessity of professional study, refuses a role for it in the university because of its preoccupation with the concrete, the particular

and the useful. But this is not the case. Newman did not argue that a university ought not teach particular knowledge but rather that applied disciplines in themselves are not the end of a university education. He used the examples of law and medicine but we can easily extend the case to business education. Newman's central concern was that professional schools, whether medicine or law, or in our own day, business, must participate in the university's principal end, which is the teaching of universal knowledge as its own end, and so Newman contrasts the educational philosophy of autonomous professional schools existing independently of a university and those schools which are integrated into the university's broader curriculum and mission.

In saying that law or medicine is not the end of a University course, I do not mean to imply that the University does not teach law or medicine. What indeed can it teach at all, if it does not teach something particular? It teaches all knowledge by teaching all branches of knowledge, and in no other way. I do but say that there will be this distinction as regards a Professor of Law, or of Medicine or of Geology, or of Political Economy, in a University and out of it, that out of a University 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.[7]

In this sense, Newman was warning of the dangers inherent in the increasing specialization of professional training. Although he conceded that such specialization at first sight contributed to a greater professional efficiency and thus to the accumulation of greater national wealth, he also warned that individuals who are thus so narrowly trained become more and more "degraded" as rational beings. One result of this narrow but powerful competence is that the individual's "sphere of action is narrowed," and "his mental powers and habits become contracted; and he resembles a subordinate part of some powerful machinery, useful in its place but insignificant and worthless out of it."[8] Perhaps this helps to explain a pervasive sense of the loss of meaning and control in contemporary culture. Newman acknowledged the necessity that a modern society define the need for particular professional roles in order to facilitate an efficient social and economic system, but he nonetheless warned that we should not give ourselves up entirely to such a system and insisted on the need for other principles which would modify and correct the coercive effects of social roles. The failure to develop such a set of social checks and balances has produced an

impoverishment of the imagination and an increasingly adversarial individualism without a mediating sense of the common good. For as Newman insisted:

Society itself requires some other contribution from each individual, besides the particular duties of his profession. And, if no such liberal intercourse be established, it is the common failing of human nature, to be engrossed with petty views and interests, to underrate the importance of all in which we are not concerned, and to carry our partial notions into cases where they are inapplicable, to act in short, as so many unconnected units, displacing and repelling one another.[9]

In a similar way, Newman argued that narrow training not only fails to equip professionals for their broader social duties but also provides inadequate preparation for their immediate professional obligations. "For if there be a single intelligible point on this head, it is that a man who has been trained to think upon one subject or for one subject only, will never be a good judge even in that one: whereas the enlargement of his circle gives him increased knowledge and power in a rapidly increasing ratio."[10] In this sense, Newman argued that the university does have a practical end despite the fact that its principal end is the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. The task of the university is not the creation of genius or the development of heroes, neither of which is susceptible to art or rule, nor is it the production of engineers, economists, critics or business leaders, although Newman conceded that "such too it includes within its scope." Rather, the practical end of a university is the training of good members of society, for university graduates have profited by an intellectual tradition which permits them to "apprehend 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," for such graduates "possess the knowledge, not only of things, but of their mutual and true relations; knowledge not merely considered as an acquirement, but as philosophy."[11] He is at pains to suggest that such liberal knowledge does not make the saint any more than it makes the hero or the artist, that knowledge alone is not sufficient for that conversion of the will that is required for holiness, but it is sufficient to create the gentleman or gentlewoman and that, as he says, is no small thing. Then again, it is not everything.

And so when Newman described the perfection of the intellect which is both the result of liberal education and its beau ideal as "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," he is not disparaging the useful arts of professional education but he does insist that the perfection of professional schools depends upon their role in the university's larger end. This clearly has implications not only for the ways in which professional courses need to be taught but also for the ways in which the faculty in professional schools are involved in the

wider conversations that define the intellectual character of the university. When Newman described the learned faculty of the university, all zealous for their own sciences and thus rivals of one another, but brought "by familiar intercourse, and for the sake of intellectual peace, to adjust together the claims and relations of their respective subjects of investigation," he was describing the conversation at the heart of liberal education, in which students begin to participate in partial ways by seeing it displayed in the interactions of the faculty.[12]

If professional programs are to meet the wider criteria identified by Newman in The Idea of a University, it would seem that the faculty teaching in the programs must themselves be broadly educated and inclined to participate in the conversations about the ultimate truths that are the principal end of the university. Such requirements are not unique to professional schools but are rather necessary characteristics for all programs in the university. What Newman defined as problematic in professional schools has come to characterize much of higher education and its consequences for the traditional commitment of Catholic liberal education to the unity of knowledge are increasingly clear. The broader conversations that have marked the relations of professional and liberal education at St. Thomas are a continuing sign of the vitality of the commitments that Newman described as essential to the university's wider mission and may well help to explain the fact that the discussions which we have begun have drawn such wide national attention.

References

1. Cited in Jaroslav Pelikan, The Idea Of The University: A Reexamination, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 6.

2. Ian Ker, The Achievement of John Henry Newman (London: Collins, 1990), p. 2.

3. John Henry Newman, The Idea of a University (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), p. 111.

4. Newman, p. 81.

5. Newman, p. 85.

6. Newman, p. 85.

7. Newman, p. 85

8. Newman, p. 127.

9. Newman, p. 127-28.

10. Newman, p. 131.

11. Newman, p. 101.

12. Newman, p. 101.