

The Rage for Originality and the Curse of Prestige

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As a scholar, I am the product of an alternative academic universe to the one described by Mark Taylor. Formed under a steady regimen of great books at St. John's College, and serving my apprenticeship in the scholarly guild through the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought (designed explicitly as an antidote to excessive specialization), I now teach in a department devoted (according to its mission statement) to "an integrated, interdisciplinary approach to human questions." I am the exception to the rule in my department, however. Most of my colleagues (like most of my best teachers) have been thoroughly trained in a discipline, but bring to bear on their practice of that discipline a broader range of interests, and a passion for a deeper learning than can be contained within conventional disciplinary limits. As I look from this vantage point, Taylor's vision of the interdisciplinary academy strikes me as pure folly.

Taylor quotes Kant's prescription for division of labor in the academy, that "for every branch of the sciences there would be a public teacher or professor appointed as its trustee." He rightly notes that, as the German research model has become dominant in the U.S. and large parts of the world, this prescription has led, over time, to utter fragmentation. But Taylor fails to reflect on what is implicit and indispensable in the notion of trusteeship evoked by Kant. The trustee is entrusted with a tradition of achievement; he or she is responsible for the past, and it is through this responsibility for the past that he or she has something to offer the future. Kant's prescription is based, it should be noted, upon an unstated cultural premise, namely that university-trained scholars will have already come to their specialized studies (as they typically would in the Europe of his day) with a rigorous classical education. They would thus understand that their trusteeship for a disciplinary tradition has its place within a larger shared trusteeship for an entire civilizational tradition.

The failure to take the notion of trusteeship seriously is evident in the incoherence of Taylor's proposals. He would do away with discipline-specific departments, and group scholars together into "problem-focused programs." He then imagines the exciting synergy that would result when such a pro-

gram “would bring together people in the humanities, arts, social and natural sciences with representatives from professional schools like medicine, law, business, engineering, social work, theology and architecture.” (What does it tell us about Taylor’s assumptions or his experience that he groups theology among the professional schools?). The obvious problem is that this arrangement would last only for one or two generations. Then the thread of the disciplinary traditions would be broken. This would be utterly disastrous for the humanities: they would become superficially appropriated adjuncts to business and engineering. In this sense, Taylor is simply calling for the completion of a trend that is already visible at many smaller colleges and universities.

If the trustees of the disciplines are to serve as trustees for a larger civilizational heritage, then the cure for narrowness is not subjecting scholars to a merry-go-round career of task forces, but rather requiring research projects to demonstrate that their focussed attention to detail also opens onto broader perspectives and deeper questions that link the project to the foundations of the broader discipline, and the discipline to the larger family of disciplines. From this point of view, Taylor’s example of narrow research, though no doubt rhetorically effective for most readers of the *New York Times*, seems to show a lack of imagination on his part. He remarks: “A colleague recently boasted to me that his best student was doing his dissertation on how the medieval theologian Duns Scotus used citations.” As a student of postmodernism, Taylor ought to know that Scotus plays a central role in the critique of modern reason developed by scholars of the Radical Orthodoxy school, like John Milbank and Katherine Pickstock. He is a figure around whom deep questions of philosophy, theology and political theory cohere. While I do not know the colleague, the student, or the project referred to by Taylor, I can well imagine that an investigation of Scotus’ use of citations could shed light on his relationship to the whole philosophical and theological tradition as a tradition, and could give some insight into how radical his intentions were as a “founder” of modern thought. Such a project could also, if rightly guided, provide the budding scholar with a profound direct encounter with a great thinker, which might lay foundations for an independent position from which to engage significant contemporary thinkers both sympathetically and critically.

The more valuable suggestion Taylor makes toward restoring wholeness is that the undergraduate curriculum be restructured to be more cross-disciplinary. Graduate students should expect to have to teach more than the intro courses and narrow topics of their discipline. Broader education, and

correspondingly broad research, would then have the support of professional expectations and market incentives. This would be a small but significant corrective to over-specialization, one that would not require the short-sighted abolition of the disciplines, but would rather enrich disciplinary education. In Taylor's woolly futurism, untethered from disciplinary guilds and infected with the catchwords of management theory, this reform takes the shape of "a web or complex adaptive network." Such adaptation would probably be guided by whatever is fashionable and catches the passions of the moment. A cross-disciplinary curriculum needs some steadier guiding principles.

These are, in fact, not hard to find. Educational critics as different as Cardinal Newman, Allan Bloom and Jacques Derrida all recognize that philosophy and theology are the fundamental and integrating disciplines. Unfortunately, these studies are generally too deeply infected by the professionalized specialization that reigns in the academy to understand themselves in this role with regard to the other disciplines. Even Catholic universities that still require students to study philosophy and theology usually undermine the most compelling rationale for such a requirement by failing to charge them with this integrating role within the curriculum. Most institutions simply have no compelling or thoughtful understanding of what constitutes a real undergraduate education.

Part of the reason for this is that most institutions have ceased to care. Taylor does not mention at all the thing universities do care about, the priority that drives much of their decisions and shapes the pressures they put on faculty. Universities and colleges usually care most about prestige. Why do they want scholars to pour so much time and energy into publishing in "journals read by no one other than a few like-minded colleagues"? Generally, it is enough if such work is read by two colleagues, the ones involved in the blind review process that is the guarantor of respectable research and high professional standards. By opening with his industry-metaphors, and unveiling the economic motives that inflate the numbers of graduate students universities admit, Taylor gives the appearance of offering a hard-headed analysis. But any proposal for reforming colleges and universities that does not address head-on their obsession with prestige can hardly be taken seriously as a practical program.

For a scholar, prestige is bound up with the rage for originality. This seems to be the hidden engine by which Kant's still slightly old-fashioned notion of trusteeship has been driven into increasingly narrow avenues. In Kant's dispassionate enlightenment vision, research is progressive and cumulative, and the scholar makes his or her contribution to the progress of this vast hu-

man enterprise. In human terms, however, the demand for novelty harnesses and feeds the motive of vanity. The gratification of a vanity that bases itself on claims to originality is best served by ignorance of the tradition; it is easier to overlook how derivative and unoriginal almost all our thoughts are if we never encounter the originals from which they derive. Thus the rage for originality undermines the responsibility and satisfaction of trusteeship.

Taylor himself seems uncritically enamored of this rage for originality; it is the only mark of successful teaching that he acknowledges in his editorial. The rhetoric Taylor uses to make his “vision” inspiring is antithetical to the notion of trusteeship. He hopes that proposals such as his will “open academia to a future we cannot conceive.” Insofar as it opens traditional disciplines to a future of chaos, it is true that we can have no clear conception of what it will look like. But in broader terms, this future is not hard to conceive at all. It is barbarism. Any reader of Tocqueville will recognize it, moreover, as a provincially American program of barbarism: dominated by pragmatist exigencies, absorbed in the present and enamored of a vague (but undoubtedly better) future, with no regard for the past.