

Narratives of the Fall

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Readers of *Academic Questions* are likely to agree that higher education is a disaster area in need of draconian reform. Beyond that, however, we have competing conceptions of what specific reforms are called for, which inevitably stem from (1) competing historical accounts that, in turn, reflect (2) competing metaphysical identities. In “After the Interregnum,” Patrick J. Deneen presents one such historical account, in which he displays a clear metaphysical preference.¹ Although there is much that I admire and agree with in his account, there is much that I consider wrong-headed. In fact, I maintain that it is Deneen’s view that is the intellectual source of everything wrong with the modern university.

In what follows, I present competing narratives of the evolution of higher education: (1) the Straussian classical narrative (identifies the core of Western tradition with the classical world); (2) the Straussian/Catholic narrative (identifies the core of Western tradition with the classical world plus Roman Catholic Christianity), which I find in Deneen; (3) the Rousseau/Marx Equality narrative; and (4) the Lockean Liberty narrative, which I espouse.

Deneen’s narrative (a term I suspect he rejects) is a familiar version of the second narrative, one I call Straussian/Catholic/Conservative. Whereas Straussians believe that all wisdom came to an end with Aristotle, Catholic Straussians believe that all wisdom came to an end with Thomas Aquinas. Essential to Deneen’s narrative is the classical Aristotelian view that true knowledge reflects an objective structure external to humanity, one both

¹Patrick J. Deneen, “After the Interregnum,” *Academic Questions* 27, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 368–75.

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objective and teleological. The teleological structure forms one great chain of being in which each element has an individual telos linked with and subordinate to a higher, more encompassing telos. Wisdom consists in the purely rational apprehension of this “objective” structure, and liberty consists in conforming to it by bending the will to that structure. Since the telos is all-encompassing, our social roles are constitutive of who we are, not something we choose.

The Straussian/Catholic view holds that modernity has allowed the timeless insights of Aristotle and Aquinas to degenerate: Aristotle-cum-Aquinas articulated these insights; all of modernity reflects the degeneration; “degeneration” is integral to this account because timeless truths are understood in an Aristotelian organic-cyclical-teleological sense—things just rot away.

I object to this view because it

- falsifies the historical account
- fails to recognize that the history of a concept is integral to its meaning (e.g., Locke on property)
- encourages the habit of “finding” everything that is worthwhile in Aristotle and Aquinas
- is unable to see or accommodate later insights (e.g., free will/individual autonomy)
- encourages an adversarial stance to modernity
- oversimplifies the process by which we discern the universal in the particular (Wittgenstein)
- reinforces the impression that core curricula are reactionary and an apology for the status quo

The Straussian/Catholic/Conservative movement performs an invaluable service in that it opposes, or thinks it opposes, a dominant form of contemporary evil—the secular progressivism of the Rousseau/Marx Equality narrative. However, this form of “conservatism” has not and cannot be articulated as an intellectually consistent and coherent substantive position.

For example, some conservatives who espouse this narrative appeal to universal truth(s). A universal truth is something true (independent of whether human beings apprehend it) and timeless (independent of historical context). Unfortunately, conservatives cannot produce an uncontested list of such truths. Moreover, some alleged universal truths have had to be revised. Once revision takes place in light of novel or historical circumstances, it becomes increasingly difficult to understand what is achieved by declaring something a universal truth. Even theology ends in mystery.

Whatever the permanent things are, we may always be in the position of having to re-articulate and revise our understanding of them. In the shadow of the Tower of Babel, in acknowledgment that we live in the world after the Fall, and by analogy with the common law that conservatives should and sometimes have espoused, is the wisdom that eschews intellectual hubris and recognizes the need to re-articulate the inherent norms of our practice in the light of changing circumstances—our practice, not some alleged independent structure to which practice is supposed to conform. The assertion of universality is a dangerous form of posturing, not an intellectual virtue. The better way is to base change on prior practice, and while practice is always in principle revisable, it is only revisable by reference to other prior practice(s). We always carry the past with us. If we keep this in mind we shall not lose the future.

Having been properly chastised, other conservatives may hasten to embrace tradition, specifically the “Western” tradition. This sounds more promising until we recognize that what they mean by tradition is something suffering from rigor mortis. The Western tradition seems to be the confluence of Athens and Rome, classical philosophy and Christianity, especially as articulated by Aquinas. Forced to concede that Jesus proclaimed himself a reformer of Judaism, the Western tradition becomes Judeo-Christian; but there is an implicit understanding that Christianity is the true heir, that no further revisions are necessary, and that Talmudic wisdom is to be replaced by catechismal demonstration. In this view, all of modernity is somehow misguided.

Earlier I maintained that Deneen’s view reflects the intellectual source of all that is wrong with the modern university. More precisely, it is the classical and specifically Aristotelian assumption that there is an order independent of humanity that is the source of the problem. Once modern physical science became the model for every subject taught, we lost our ability to understand ourselves in a humanistic way. It would seem ludicrous to reject modern physical science—the Catholic Church has made this mistake too many times. It would make more sense to reject the conception of classical objectivity and maintain that self-understanding is *sui generis*. This would actually elevate the humanities by not enclosing them within an outdated metaphysics or reducing them to the social sciences.

Many conservatives are attracted to Catholicism because it appears to uphold universal norms. But the history of Christianity is a history of councils, schisms, heresies, factions, etc. To this day, the Catholic Church has a nominal head, the Pope, but there is no longer any central intellectual authority. What we see is a giant global bureaucracy with a set of occasional pronouncements, namely

Catholic Social Thought, that reflect rival factions who understand the social and political implications very differently. If anything, the Church today seems to have fallen into the hands of or succumbed to the very “totalitarians” who have ruined the modern American university.

Perhaps it would be wiser to see that the longevity of the Catholic Church reflects, in part, an understanding that encompasses faith as well as reason, and that faith permits the belief in fundamental norms that need to be reexamined and re-articulated in ways that appear inconsistent with and even alien to earlier expressions and practices. This requires a more nuanced and historical understanding of Christianity.

The most egregious error of many conservatives in this narrative is the failure to understand and address modernity. Having misrepresented and dismissed modernity, those who espouse the Straussian/Catholic narrative fail to see that the major debate lies not between the ancients and the moderns but between two forms of modernity. On the one hand, we have Lockean Liberty (endorsement of the Technological Project—the transformation of nature to serve human goals—free market economy, limited government, rule of law, and the culture of personal autonomy); on the other, we find the Rousseau/Marx Equality narrative (rejection of the Technological Project, free market economy, limited government, rule of law, and the culture of personal autonomy). For the latter, liberty = the government providing resources through redistribution.

The Rousseau narrative, like all bad ideas, originated in France. Rousseau himself attacked the Technological Project (as do many radical environmentalists today). Marx subsequently acquiesced in the project, but joins with Rousseau in other elements of the narrative, which critiques the free market economy as a form of oppression by the rich, espouses unlimited government power, rejects the rule of law in favor of radical politics, and endorses community instead of individual freedom and responsibility. It believes that human beings are born good and corrupted by their environment; denies freedom of the will, believing that there is a telos to each individual, to society, and to the market as a whole again; and believes that the social sciences can produce a social technology that, in the hands of an all-powerful government, can control the social environment and bring us all to the promised land.

But the better form of modernity, as I understand, is the post-Renaissance confluence of

- the Technological Project (Descartes, Bacon, Locke);

- the free market economy, which maximizes the creative power of individuals through private property to explore the promise of the Technological Project (Hume, Adam Smith, Hayek);
- limited government to protect the market and not to act as a parasite upon it (Locke, Smith, the American Founding, Mill, Hayek); and
- the rule of law (which exists only in the Anglo-American case law tradition and is best expressed by the Oakeshottean notion of a civil association), which in turn depends upon the culture of personal autonomy (Kant, Hegel, Mill).

Ironically, Straussian/Catholic conservatives ignore classical philology by failing to note that autonomy = imposing order on oneself, not self-indulgence. The critique of and demonization of the term “autonomy” is a form of *ad hominem*, nothing more than hostility to those who refuse to acknowledge teleology. Nor are they able to understand that the Technological Project is the spiritual quest of modernity by making nature a reflection of human co-creation (e.g., as articulated by Pope John Paul II but denied by Pope Francis), not the will to power. I do not think it is an accident that Protestants are more likely to understand this than Catholics. I do not think it is an accident that the United States was founded by Anglo-Protestants.

The Clash of Narratives

What I reject in both versions of the Strauss narrative is the assertion of a human and social teleology. I reject the idea that community membership is constitutive of who we are—in my mind, membership must be voluntary and we are required on occasion to rearticulate the meaning of the community in novel circumstances, to add to it, delete some of it, and perhaps revolt against it. I do not believe that market economies and limited representative government are second-best to anything. Finally, it is precisely what the first two narratives share with the Rousseau/Marx Equality narrative (individual and social telos, community) that make it impossible for their adherents to oppose effectively the latter narrative.

The Locke Liberty narrative, my alternative, favors physical technology, free markets, limited government, the rule of law, and personal autonomy. It presumes that people have free will and hence cannot be refashioned by social technology, opposes the belief that there is a telos, and insists that membership in a community must be voluntary. I begin with this observation:

The greatest innovative ideas and initiatives are typically made outside universities. The greater part of universities have not even been very forward to adopt those improvements...[S]everal...have chosen to remain...the sanctuaries in which exploded systems and obsolete prejudices found shelter and protection after they had been hunted out of every other corner of the world. In general the richest and best endowed universities have been the slowest in adopting those improvements....The endowments...have diminished...the necessity of application in the teachers. Their subsistence... is derived from a fund altogether independent of their success and reputation in their particular professions....In the University of Oxford the greatest part of the public professors have for these many years given up altogether even the pretense of teaching.²

The author, as so many readers doubtlessly recognize, is famed professor and author Adam Smith. What he says is as true today as it was during the eighteenth century. It was certainly true of the medieval university that initially opposed introducing the sciences—why do we need science when we have the humanities? In an odd reversal, for the past science-devoted century there has been hostility to studying commerce and economics.

The Modern University

Looked at structurally, the university today is a scene of spontaneous disorder and academic license. In theory, governing boards exist to represent the interests of taxpayer citizens in public universities and the original intent of philanthropists in private universities. In practice, the boards of modern universities tend to rubber-stamp policy actions generated by university administrations and faculties. There is little effective external control on the internal authorities that run educational institutions.

Because tuition fees are held at artificially low levels in public universities, efficient evaluation of their output is prevented. Because government funding is linked directly to the number of students, university managers divert resources toward enrollment and away from instruction. The result is larger classes, lower admission standards, and less preparation for the classroom by instructors. Given the incentives, there is pressure to extend the allowable time taken to complete a degree. Government funding of private universities has now reached

²Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, vol. 2 (1776; Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1981), 761.

the point where virtually no universities exist that can be described as “private.” More important, the feudal guild system of academic disciplines operates in both systems, so that the same people circulate from one to the other. We have witnessed the collapse of the distinction between public and private education.

There are two sources for the current state of degradation: the domination of higher education by a faction with a social and political agenda, and the addiction to financing education through increased reliance and ultimate dependence upon local, state, and federal governments. These sources work in tandem because the political agenda construes social life as a series of problems beyond the control of individuals and capable of solution only through a statist-controlled social technology.

How did all of this come about?

The modern American university emerged in the nineteenth century from a variety of sources: religious affiliation, local communities, and private benefactors. From the beginning, the university consisted of factions with competing paradigms. The oldest paradigm is moral, as epitomized in John Henry Newman, originating in the small liberal arts college with a religious affiliation. The purpose of liberal education was to preserve, critique, and transmit our cultural inheritance, to pursue knowledge, and to foster a sense of liberty and responsibility. In seeking to subordinate itself to the outside world, the university would only compromise itself and become an instrument for commercial or political exploitation.

A second paradigm is the German research model of the university, with its emphasis on the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, the graduate school, and the training of professionals. Knowledge cannot be in the service of special interests, because knowledge knows no political boundaries. Although nonpolitical, the spectacular success of this model in science and technology encouraged government subvention.

The third paradigm is utilitarian, wherein the university serves to solve various and sundry social problems. In this model, the university exists as a means to social ends defined externally to the university itself. The notion of the college graduate as a civil servant evolved into the notion of a special class that aims to run society.

Newman’s moral model of the university has been marginalized, the research model has been corrupted and co-opted, and the politicized utilitarian model has triumphed.

The Triumph of Political Utility

The origin of the triumph of the politicized utilitarian model lies in the Enlightenment Project, by which I mean the view that human nature can be

defined and controlled through science and an alleged social technology. This project originated among the eighteenth-century French *philosophes*. Denying the Christian concept of sin but still choosing to play God, these *philosophes* initiated the modern search for a secular utopia. The high priests of the project currently reside largely in the social science departments, and are further charged to enlist students in supporting political candidates who advocate the project of social technology.

The entrenchment of social technology has spawned affirmative action, the diminution of the humanities in favor of the social sciences, and the undermining of students' ability to think critically.

First, affirmative action. This is not what it appears to be. It is not simply the hiring and promotion of people by proportion in the population, but the hiring and promotion of people who support the agenda of secular progressivism. Soon job advertisements will read "conservative women, conservative African Americans, and conservative Hispanics need not apply." A further consequence of affirmative action is the growth of race, class, and gender studies programs, which means hiring people willing and able to teach Fanon and Foucault as opposed to Augustine and Hobbes. Invariably, those willing to teach Fanon subscribe to doctrinaire secular progressivism (a version of the Rousseau/Marx Equality narrative) or worse. These programs and curricular changes are intended to influence the trajectory of hiring and scholarship.

Second, we have the subversion of the humanities. Legitimate scientific thinking speculates on the hidden structure behind how things appear on the surface. If the theorized hidden structure is verified via deductive scientific experimentation, then our original understanding is replaced by appeal to structures previously hidden. The discovery of atoms, viruses, and genes are examples. In contrast with scientific thinking, humanistic, inductive thinking clarifies our ordinary understanding of our practice by extracting from that practice a set of norms that can be used reflectively to guide future practice. We do not change or replace our ordinary understanding, but come to know it in a new and better way. That is why Plato, Shakespeare, and T.S. Eliot are perennially relevant to us.

Pseudo-social science has replaced the humanities. In addition to denying us access to the illumination of the human predicament that comes from lively confrontation with the Judeo-Christian tradition, pseudo-social science also sought to replace our humanistic image of ourselves with a pseudo-scientific image. The results: denigration of core curricula that provide students with the fundamental concepts by which we come to understand who we are; the substitution of speculative hypotheses about the alleged underlying causes of our "corrupt" values.

In addition to this, the kind of thinking stressed in the pseudo-social sciences is responsible for the demise of critical thinking. Unlike legitimate physical science, the alleged hidden structures to which pseudo-social science appeals never get confirmed empirically. Instead, we get an unending series in which one faddish language replaces another. In the presence of competing theories of hidden structures, and with no way to choose among them, pseudo-social science, instead of refuting alternative views, resorts to speculating on the hidden structure behind these views. That is, pseudo-social scientists speculate on why their adversaries hold what they take to be false views. The result is that instead of engaging in honest intellectual dialogue, they dismiss their opponents as victims of some hidden force. It is much easier to call your opponent a racist or sexist than to answer objections about the incoherence of affirmative action.

The Intellectual Climate Today

In sum, doctrinaire secular progressivism has changed the intellectual climate on campus, undermined the capacity for humanistic self-appraisal, condoned an atmosphere that refuses to engage in honest self-examination and self-criticism, undermined genuine academic freedom, and cheated our students.

What is to be done?

I offer ten recommendations. We should:

1. make sure that the explication of our fundamental values is part of every institution. The main issue is whether we need a specific major institution focused on the explication of our fundamental values. I suggest that we do not, and that it is a great danger to have just one. Experience shows that the family, the church, the independent school, and private philanthropy are best equipped to handle this function. Hence, any public policy that undermines the autonomy of these institutions must be resisted. If conservatism is to have a positive agenda it can only be to support the procedural norms of toleration that protect those who wish to preserve voluntarily a substantive conservative way of life.
2. live up to private enterprise, since it is one of our fundamental values, and instantiate it in education. I urge the complete privatization of schooling at every level.

3. urge the removal of federal and state government from higher education in the form of eliminating subsidies, student loans, and contracts for the performance of any government-sponsored research.
4. distinguish and separate from higher education all commercial, scientific, and technological research, all of which are best and more efficiently left to private research institutes.
5. distinguish occupational training from higher education, removing the former from the incompetent hands of so-called professional educators.
6. distinguish *longer* education—additional training necessitated beyond twelfth grade by a rapidly evolving work environment—from *higher* education, encouraging, alternative conceptions of higher education content and methodology. We should preserve what we think is valuable by recognizing that we live in a morally pluralistic world. To insist upon hegemony is to pave the way for the triumph of secular progressivism.
7. eliminate all government-sponsored accrediting agencies.
8. eliminate tenure.
9. welcome and explore alternative forms of education made possible by new technology, giving us the capacity to create on a macro-cultural level a virtual university and the invisible college that Pierre Goodrich's Liberty Fund embodies on the micro-cultural level.
10. bring a class-action suit against higher education institutions for failing to live up to their promises, for misrepresentation, for false and misleading advertising, and for undermining Western civilization.

This is where I think I differ from Deneen: I, too, wish to preserve our intellectual inheritance, but that includes modernity as well. I also think it is time to rethink that inheritance in the light of changing circumstances and to be more imaginative about how we do it. I, too, oppose modern authoritarianism, but, most especially, I do not want to substitute for it a classical authoritarianism.