John Henry Newman's *Idea of a University* as Critique of Jeremy Bentham's Utilitarian Conception of Education

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Abstract
The main thesis of this article is that Newman's famous *Idea of a University* cannot be fully appreciated without the background of the educational programmes popularized in the first half of the 19th century, which have their matrix in the utilitarian philosophy of Jeremy Bentham. The comparison of these two thinkers shows that Newman built his system of education and arrived at its basic principles precisely by refuting the principles of utilitarianism and liberalism of his time. From this perspective, his work on education no longer remains a quiet prose, but can be seen as a moral and cultural struggle over fundamental values.

Keywords
Newman; Bentham; education; utility; value

Introduction

John Henry Newman's (1801–1890) classic work *The Idea of a University* on the nature and aims of education, which originally consisted of two separate parts – the first nine conferences delivered in 1852 and published under the title "Discourses on University Education" were followed in 1854–58 by ten studies named "Lectures and Essays on University Subjects" – developed historically in the context of the founding of a Catholic university in Ireland, of which Newman himself was the first rector. Formally, the work does not rank among Newman's polemical writings, yet the object of this essay is to show that it is deeply combative in its nature. Who and what, then, is Newman arguing against in his *Idea*?

It should be noted that Newman had been concerned with the issue of education while still an Anglican, namely in his letters sent to the editor of *The Times* in 1841. Therein he strongly opposed the educational reforms proposed by the politician Sir Robert Peel (1788–1850) who, as Prime Minister, sought to establish secular colleges (known as "Queen's Colleges"), which would fall directly under the control of the state and would be common to Catholics and Protestants, but without providing them with any religious education. Newman, however, was farsighted enough to see that behind this plan was not an ecumenical motive, but a particular philosophical tradition, of which the English philosopher and father of utilitarianism, Jeremy

Bentham (1748–1832), was the chief exponent. It is thus Bentham who becomes one of the main targets of Newman's criticism when he defines him as the "master" of one school of philosophy and characterizes his view on education as follows:

> Mr. Bentham would answer, that the knowledge which carries virtue along with it, is the knowledge how to take care of number one—a clear appreciation of what is pleasurable, what painful, and what promotes the one and prevents the other… Useful Knowledge is that which tends to make us more useful to ourselves;—a most definite and intelligible account of the matter, and needing no explanation (Newman 1899, 262–263).

Therefore, it is not inappropriate to assume that *The Idea of a University*, illustrating an alternative model of education to the secular proposals mentioned above, is a continuation and deepening of Newman's critique from the Anglican period, as evidenced by his scathing remark in *The Idea* about English philosophers, which includes Bentham, as well: "If we were to ask for a report of our philosophers, the investigation would not be so agreeable; for we have three of evil, and one of unsatisfactory repute. Locke is scarcely an honour to us in the standard of truth, grave and manly as he is; and Hobbes, Hume, and Bentham, in spite of their abilities, are simply a disgrace" (Newman 1891, 319).

So, what are the fundamental principles of Newman's and Bentham's philosophies of education? In fact, both English thinkers exhibit similar elements of interest, but at the same time differ diametrically in their basic views, which I wish to illustrate briefly.

1. The issue of the primary scope of education

It is noteworthy that Bentham, like Newman, devoted himself passionately to the question of education, which resulted in his most important work *Chrestomathia*, first published in 1816 for the proposed Chrestomathic Day School. However, already around 1800–1801 he compiled "An Outline Scheme for Irish Education," which exists in manuscript form at University College, London, where he addressed the issue of the education of the Irish, especially of the poor and working class. Since Bentham's entire philosophy was based on the simple principle of utility, by which he meant that principle which "tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness" (Bentham 1843, vol. 1, 1–2), he also saw education as a useful means of achieving this goal. This implies that education "was to be at all times both useful and practical," because as such it would give people capacity to control their own environment and their own lives (Taylor 1980, 20).

Turning to Newman's *Idea*, what first comes to the fore is his central principle, utterly antithetical to Bentham's, according to which the scope of education lies not primarily in utility but in the fact that education has a value in itself:

> I am asked what is the end of University Education, and of the Liberal or Philosophical Knowledge which I conceive it to impart: I answer, that… it has a very tangible, real, and sufficient end, though the end cannot be divided from that knowledge itself. Knowledge is

> capable of being its own end. Such is the constitution of the human mind, that any kind of knowledge, if it be really such, is its own reward… I consider, then, that I am chargeable with no paradox, when I speak of a Knowledge which is its own end, when I call it liberal knowledge, or a gentleman's knowledge, when I educate for it, and make it the scope of a University (Newman 1891, 102–103, 111).

Although Newman is well aware that benefits can be derived from education, yet he finds it imperative to emphasize that the primary goal of the university is to impart knowledge for its own sake and not to tailor education to some external ends or to lead students merely to acquire practical skills useful in society: "That further advantages accrue to us and redound to others by its possession, over and above what it is in itself, I am very far indeed from denying; but, independent of these, we are satisfying a direct need of our nature in its very acquisition." And the reason is that knowledge "is valuable for what its very presence in us does for us after the manner of a habit, even though it be turned to no further account, nor subserve any direct end" (Newman 1891, 104). His pointed critique of the utility principle is understandable and quite relevant even today, for once the intrinsic value of education is lost, the result is that "standards external to the central life of the university soon make their way into the driver's seat of university practices. Pressures are put on professors to prove to outside adjudicators that they are imparting useful knowledge to their students, and students begin to learn that what is really important about their university efforts is the passing of tests, the completion of courses for credit, and the establishment of a respectable GPA" (Sanford 2015, 43).[1]

2. Liberalism versus liberal education

The distinctive feature of Bentham's utilitarian programme was liberalism, which P. Kreeft defines as "the maximization of individual liberty" and which manifested itself especially in the area of ethics, since utilitarians "denied that any natural moral law, any objective, universal moral values could be known by man" and maintained that "ethics, like every other kind of human knowledge, must be based on science, on empirical observation and calculation, and not on religion, on the will of God or divinely revealed commandments" (Kreeft 2023, 116). One of the reasons for Bentham's fascination with the natural sciences was that these seemed far more effective than some sort of metaphysics, which constantly revolves around the same questions, while the sciences, through the method of experimentation, offer ever new impulses and data.

As a thinker, Newman was also in this respect quite antithetical to Bentham, because his philosophy was explicitly opposed to liberalism. On the occasion of receiving his cardinal's hat in Rome, in his famous speech he summed up his entire thinking as a struggle against liberalism: "For thirty, forty, fifty years I have resisted to the best of my powers the spirit of liberalism in religion… Liberalism in religion is the doctrine that there is no positive truth in religion, but that one creed is as good as another, and this is the teaching which is gaining

[1] GPA – Grade Point Average is an internationally recognised calculation used to find the average result of all grades achieved throughout a course.

substance and force daily. It is inconsistent with any recognition of any religion, as *true*. It teaches that all are to be tolerated, for all are matters of opinion" (Neville 1905, 64–65).

It is paradoxical that at the same time Newman refers to his model of education as "liberal education," understanding it in the above sense as "knowledge for its own sake." According to Newman, this kind of education has its roots in ancient Greece and Rome and reached its peak in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in the form of the seven liberal arts of the *trivium* and *quadrivium*. Furthermore, by liberal education he understands the cultivation and expansion of the mind, which, however, is not identical with accumulating as many facts and information as possible. The acquisition of new ideas is undoubtedly an important aspect, but does not constitute the entire process of learning, in which the mind actively acts on the data it has acquired. As a consequence, authentic knowledge consists in the so-called *connected view* of all things, that is, in the ability to understand the relations between the various scientific disciplines:

> And therefore a truly great intellect, and recognized to be such by the common opinion of mankind… is one which takes a connected view of old and new, past and present, far and near, and which has an insight into the influence of all these one on another; without which there is no whole, and no centre. It possesses the knowledge, not only of things, but also of their mutual and true relations; knowledge, not merely considered as acquirement, but as philosophy (Newman 1891, 134).

3. The question of the content of education

The utilitarian and liberal premises of Bentham's philosophy necessarily led to a reductionist notion of the curriculum in his educational system. To the question of what should be taught, he answers in the light of his principle of utility: "In determining the *quantity* of instruction to be administered within a given compass of time, *practicability...* should be the measure. In the choice of *subject-matters* of instruction, *utility*... should be the guide" (Bentham 1843, vol. 8, 397). It is not surprising, therefore, that if on the one hand he preferred the natural sciences as particularly useful, on the other hand he considered the humanities, especially poetry and classical languages, to be completely superfluous (Taylor, 22–23). Furthermore, as we have seen, the school reform promoted by Peel and based on Bentham's philosophy promoted the idea of omitting religious education from the curriculum altogether.

Newman dismisses these proposals as absurd, pointing out that the purpose of the university – as the very name *universitas* implies – is to teach universal knowledge and thus it must encompass all disciplines, both natural sciences and humanities, because "if certain branches of knowledge were excluded, those students of course would be excluded also, who desired to pursue them" (Newman 1891, 20–21). If, therefore, this institution is to convey all branches of knowledge, it cannot exclude such an important subject as theology. Newman explains this by means of the image of a circle: knowledge is a coherent whole, a kind of "circle" of sciences and disciplines, in which theology must also maintain its legitimate place, because if it were to be left out, the other disciplines would overstep their boundaries, occupy the territory of

theology, and begin to interpret theological problems in their own way. Its abolition would result not only in the fragmentation of the individual sciences, but in the breaking up of the whole circle of knowledge:

> I cannot so construct my definition of the subject-matter of University Knowledge, and so draw my boundary lines around it, as to include therein the other sciences commonly studied at Universities, and to exclude the science of Religion… If the knowledge of the Creator is in a different order from knowledge of the creature, so, in like manner, metaphysical science is in a different order from physical, physics from history, history from ethics. You will soon break up into fragments the whole circle of secular knowledge, if you begin the mutilation with divine (Newman 1891, 25–26).

4. The relationship between education and moral behaviour

Bentham's idea of education was based on the "social class bias" that resulted from his view of the condition of the poor (Taylor, 20). He believed that the poor posed a problem and a threat to the members of the middle class, as poverty often led to crime, laziness, and political discontent. At the same time, he was convinced that education would be an appropriate remedy through which the poor would become morally better, because "[n]umberless are the mischievous delusions to which a man is exposed by ignorance, against which knowledge presents the only preservative" (Bentham 1843, vol. 8, 12).

The idea that the university should combine knowledge and moral formation is equally present in Newman's vision of education, when he stresses that the university premises should be at once "oracles of philosophy and shrines of devotion," so that the intellectual layman may become religious, and the devout ecclesiastic may become intellectual (Newman 1857, 15). At the same time, he highlights the fact that knowledge and culture are not identical with moral goodness and that "being a gentleman" is not the same as "being a Christian", as he expresses it in the famous passage of *The Idea of a University*:

> Knowledge is one thing, virtue is another; good sense is not conscience, refinement is not humility, nor is largeness and justness of view faith. Philosophy, however enlightened, however profound, gives no command over the passions, no influential motives, no vivifying principles. Liberal Education makes not the Christian, not the Catholic, but the gentleman. It is well to be a gentlemen, it is well to have a cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid, equitable, dispassionate mind, a noble and courteous bearing in the conduct of life;—these are the connatural qualities of a large knowledge; they are the objects of a University; I am advocating, I shall illustrate and insist upon them; but still, I repeat, they are no guarantee for sanctity or even for conscientiousness… Quarry the granite rock with razors, or moor the vessel with a thread of silk; then may you hope with such keen and delicate instruments as human knowledge and human reason to contend against those giants, the passion and the pride of man (Newman 1891,120–121).

Conclusion

The confrontation between the two thinkers shows that Newman's *Idea* cannot be fully understood and appreciated without the background of the educational programmes popularized in the first half of the 19th century. It is therefore equally likely that Newman constructed his system of education and arrived at its basic principles precisely by refuting the principles of utilitarianism and liberalism of his day. From this perspective his *Idea of a University* no longer remains a tranquil prose, but represents almost a moral and cultural struggle for fundamental values.

When Newman puts forward the idea that education is an end in itself, he is in reality suggesting that there exists a large system of objective facts that have enduring and transcendent values. In this light, the English scholar can be said to stand in continuity with that great tradition of thought wherein the first philosophical question is concerned with being as such, and upon which depends – and not the other way around – the question of its usefulness and practical applicability. In passing, it can be noted that one of the philosophers who in the 20th century developed in a special way the theory of values outlined by Newman was the Christian phenomenologist Dietrich von Hildebrand (1889–1977), who in his *Ethics* made an important distinction between the "value" and the "useful", or more precisely between what is "important-in-itself" and what is "subjectively satisfying", in order to emphasize the priority of the former over the latter (Hildebrand 2020, 66–76). The challenge that *The Idea of a University* poses to modern readers thus becomes very obvious: Will we accept Newman's proposal about education as a vehicle of perennial values, or rather those proposals that regard education purely as a means of utility, benefit and short-term happiness? Are we willing to study, learn, and labour to attain knowledge because it is useful, or because it is primarily important-in-itself?

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