THE MORAL COLLAPSE OF THE UNIVERSITY: PROFESSIONALISM, PURITY, AND ALIENATION

Bruce Wilshire
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In an interview with Bill Moyers, Brown University's new president. Vartan Gregorian, observed an increasingly obvious fact confronting higher education: "What is missing in our education is integration of knowledge. Somewhere, somehow, we have to provide that" (A World of Ideas, p. 186).

Yet the university fails to provide such integration. With approximately 850,000 new titles in the world each year and nearly 75,000 in the United States, the multiversity, driven by a positivist model of fragmented specialization, dwells on the pieces. A snippet of philosophy here, a lump of history there. A shard of biology. As Naisbitt observed in Megatrents, "The world is drowning in detail but starved for knowledge."

In his study The Moral Collapse of The University: Professionalism, Purity, and Alienation, Rutgers University professor of philosophy Bruce Wilshire argues for a radical restructuring of the modern research university. Seeing the university as a Newtonian organization in a post-Newtonian world, a cold and educationally deadly bureaucracy, Wilshire attacks the effects of what Ortega y Gasset in the early 1930's called the "barbarism of specialization."

His title makes the study sound like reactionary moralizing against hedonistic over-indulgence. Far from it. Wilshire argues that "the contemporary research university lacks moral direction. Amidst all our stunning discoveries we have forgotten . . . what it means to be a human being in the world--also of course what it means to be a good one. We tend to treat ourselves and our students abstractly, as if we were divided into bodies and minds" (p. xxiii-xxiv).

This observation in the book's introduction directs Wilshire's entire study. Tracing our university intellectual foundations from Decartes' body-mind duality through the myopic obsession with objectivity based in twentieth century logical positivism, Professor Wilshire explains the epistemological flaw at the heart of the research university.

He observes the "Decartes" rationalism and mentalism feed a materialism in which only natural science is credited with powers of truth, and ethical and aesthetic judgments are construed as merely the expression of feelings and preferences of self as private ego" (p. 39). Thus any discipline that interprets emotions and that private self non-scientifically--poetry, history, philosophy, the arts--loses credibility, and funds, in the modern university. Under such a limited Cartesian epistemology, abetted by the positivist separation of objective and subjective truth, the university discourages efforts to make connections. Both the professoriate and the student, argues Wilshire, labor in an ignorance of specialist fragmentation focused on business and technology.

Wilshire's argument replays that of Parker Palmer in To Know As We Are Known/A Spirituality of Education: "The failure of modern knowledge is not primarily a failure in our ethics . . . Rather, it is the failure of our knowing itself to recognize and reach for its deeper source and passion, to allow love to inform the relations that our knowledge creates--with ourselves, with each other, with the whole animate and inanimate world" (p. 9).

Although Wilshire approaches the topic philosophically, not religiously as does Palmer, both fault the effects of narrow academic specialization and professionalism devoted to research, publishing, and careerism that takes precedence over teaching:

"Teaching . . . cannot be fundamental value in the university . . . because a teacher's accomplishment as teacher in the classroom cannot be 'replicated' nation-wide or world-wide (the ideal of science): it is not confirmable or authorizable by authorities 'in the field" (p. 79). As one of Wilshire's colleagues put it, "We all know what 'research university' means: To hell with the undergraduates."

In addition, the Rutgers' philosophy teacher has no kind words for the quantitative administrators who milk legislatures and Congress for funding by counting articles and books in lieu of working qualitatively to improve classroom instruction. The result, writes Wilshire, is research that "is no more than a mountain of chips" with little understanding "about human life as an integral whole, something about human goodness." Here he would disagree with Palmer's belief that our ethics have not failed us. To Wilshire, the university's pursuit of professional, political, and institutional ego-gratification marks an abdication of the purpose of the intellectual life: "Intellectual freedom implies ethical responsibility" (p. 57).

The university's ethical purpose is to help students develop tools and insights to analyze and synthesize the informational overload in our culture. For Wilshire, the specialization and bureaucracy of the university rule out such integration and insight. He cites the continuing failure of interdisciplinary courses, the academy's low regard for generalists and their team-taught idealisms, and the continued reliance upon graduate assistants instead of senior professors in undergraduate classes.

Thus he believes that "The sickness of the university is primarily ethical. It has failed to address the real need of person--failed to provide the knowledge that can orient and shield us from at least some of the dangers and anxieties of living." (p. 217)

Yet Wilshire looks optimistically to the university's future, seeing the subsidence of the current "high-water mark of academic purity and professionalism," the seeds of holistic, integrated thought taking root in some institutions, and an increasing publication of educational reformist articles and books.

Professor Wilshire offers a list of remedies: recognize and reward the talented teachers; keep the researchers without pedagogical abilities out of the classroom but in use as resources; encourage personal contact between students and professors in order to effect mind-body integration; use the arts to help students enact their book learning about human concerns and problems; and keep the colleges within each university small enough to be personal but large enough to include many temperaments, careers, and ethnic-gender varieties.

The point of such changes "would be to discover ways of living with each other which are actually valuable for human beings . . . the purpose of the colleges is to promote liberal, that is liberating education; that which frees from constricting prejudice and ideologies, from prejudicial belief, for example, that the power one gains by occupying a niche in a bureaucratic hierarchy is equivalent to realization and power as a person (not just as a professional)" (pp. 231-2).

Yet Wilshire recognizes the barriers to such radical change: bureaucratic and institutional practice and inertia; the inherent narrowing, constricting specialization of the Ph.D.; the concept of core curricula with their territorial, monetary, staffing implications; tenuring and the established cadre of the specialized professors; and the mechanisms of tallying and funding universities. Nevertheless, he cites programs at large institutions in support of his optimism: Brandeis, University of Minnesota, and even some efforts at Rutgers ("a quite rigid bureaucracy").

In the end Bruce Wilshire's book provides a sensitive, meticulous argument for deep, profound changes in the modern university. His chronicle of the philosophical, intellectual sources of the modern multiversity reveals exactly how students have become more important as FTEs, SCHs, and GRE scores than as individual young humans who need help as humans. No doubt he would agree with Parker Palmer's

observation that if education serves its best function, "The knower becomes co-participant in a community of faithful relationships with other persons and creations and things . . . We find truth by pledging our troth, and knowing becomes a reunion of separated beings whose primary bond is not of logic but of love" (p. 32).

Indeed, Bruce Wilshire's closing words echo Palmer's intent: "The key point is that there is not substitute for human relationships and presence, for listening, for sharing silence and wonderment, and for caring" (p. 282).

Yet as faculties at colleges and universities find themselves increasingly pressured to publish or move on, as legislatures fund quantifiable productivity, and as small private colleges fold up in increasing numbers, the vision of this book seems clouded. In a society driven by consumerism, the work of literature, music, dance, theatre arts and philosophy departments becomes numbered among the fluff. The new doctorate in accounting enters as an assistant professor at 60,000. The productive poet laureate, full professor English with twenty-two years, three collections of poems, and tenure will retire next year at $40,000.

In spite of the legitimacy and profundity of Bruce Wilshire's cry for change, one must ask if the Rutgers' professor has taught philosophy over long. He notes early that "the over-valuing of the secular-scientific intellect . . . risks inciting despair when it cannot cope with certain grave human problems . . ." (p. 58). However, the pressure on young university professors continues to be certifiable professionalism--publications, research, grant solicitation--not quality in the classroom. Increasingly administrators use the prestige of publications to pick the public's pockets, asserting the quality of teaching at their institutions but doing little to develop or reward classroom excellence. So much argues against the solutions of this book.

Yet with Wilshire we all must hope that his appeal will ship the winds of change. For without such change, we can but reproduce in our own image more barbarians of specializaion.

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