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University Studies as a Human Practice: What is Excellence for a Student?

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When Alasdair MacIntyre in his famous book on virtues called our attention to the significance of Aristotelian ethics and opened the most interesting debate on this subject in the 20th century, he also wrote a surprising statement: “The most notable difference so far between my account and any account that could be called Aristotelian is that although I have in no way restricted the exercise of virtues to the context of practices, it is in terms of practices that I have located their point and function” (1984: 201). Therefore, practices are a key element of human flourishing because virtues and practices are intrinsically related. But immediately the following question arises: What are practices according to MacIntyre? In a recent essay, he answers this question briefly: They are “forms of systematic human activity, each with its own goods internal” (2006: 46). And, as I have tried to explain elsewhere, these internal goods that characterize every practice depend on a key notion: work (2009: 35-45). This is the great difference between MacIntyre and Aristotle, for in giving to practices this central role, MacIntyre rejected that virtues are principally acquired through leisure and the good life at the polis. On the contrary, virtues need a form of systematic activity in order to “exist.” This makes it possible to claim that if MacIntyre considers practices as the point and function of virtues, work can be thought of as the point and function of practices.

The goal of this article is to respond to other questions related to this first one: What is the best practice for a university student? Can the contemporary university offer a notion of study (either as scholars or as students) that is also intrinsically related to virtues? In order to answer them, I will address two issues: What has philosophy said about work? What can history tell us about the moment in which the first *Studia Generalia* appeared in Europe? These two approaches will grant us a deep

understanding of human beings and will help us to describe what excellence is for a university student. More precisely, I will defend the thesis that excellence can be achieved not necessarily due to a good curricula and good marks, or to well-paid patents invented by a research group, but by the acquisition of social skills and abilities that contribute to developing virtues, and therefore rich personalities that can serve society in the future.

1. Philosophy and Work

Although today work and academic activity are related notions and even synonyms, for the Classics this was not the case. Aristotle's description of work occupied a secondary place: Work is neither a human activity nor an aid to our flourishing as rational, free and social members of a city. Work impedes the contemplation of eternal truths and is a private and constrained task, developed at the *oikia* (house) by women and slaves, in order to satisfy bodily needs. The "good life" for man does not mean work; it means leisure and attainment of virtues in an open space where free speech and political influence can take place. Contemplating truth is the highest activity a human being can accomplish and corresponds to the theoretical use of reason.

As a result, Aristotle defends a sort of aristocratic humanism in which women and slaves are only workers or producers. The good life is reserved for the citizen: a full, rational and free man. Leisure (*scholē* or *otium*) or the liberal arts make human beings draw nearer to the gods. But work (*ascholē* or *nec-otium*), or the servile arts, is what distinguishes life at home, where production and reproduction to survive are the main activities.

The Middle Ages continued this vision, distinguishing the *vita contemplativa* from the *vita activa*. With the appearance of monastic forms of life, the contemplative life became the highest expression of Christian existence, the best way to achieve sanctity. Therefore this distinction remained an opposition for many: ordinary life and work in the world was a second-class existence, making it difficult to go to heaven.

Protestantism was certainly a further step in the clarification of the meaning of work. *Beruf*, the German word for both craft and divine vocation, has its root in the verb *rufen* (to summon), and evoked a quite exciting combination of divine appeal and worldly business. *Beruf* connects work with the vocation that God concedes to human beings, in view of his or her own moral and religious fulfillment. Luther tried to

substitute the contemplative ideal that, according to him, implied uselessness and irresponsible abandonment of the world, with an “interworldly” asceticism in which one’s profession played a determining role as a divine summons. All men must collaborate with God through their work.

This religious doctrine influenced the philosophical terrain, too. The decisive figure in reinforcing this shift was René Descartes. His writings granted a privileged position to science, with detriment to the theoretical approach. The proposal to substitute “speculative philosophy that is taught in school” with another philosophy that is “radically practical” was his. Finally, human beings “may become lords and dominators of nature” (1976: 61-2).

According to his famous declaration, *cogito, ergo sum*, Descartes characterized human beings in terms of reason. This dimension had to be clearly distinguished from the body. We *are* a thinking substance —a thinking thing— and we *have* a material substance, which is our body. Our freedom depends on our rationality; our body is a mechanistic substance and no longer represents a living dimension. Nature appeared as totally homogeneous and knowable, because it could be transformed into an abstract object, plotted as space and time coordinates that could be translated into numbers or quantities.

To summarize, the supremacy of *otium* or leisure as a classical attitude was gradually replaced with scientific standards and technical applications. Not only did science acquire a privileged position, but the ideal of power over all of creation placed man at the center of culture as a whole. First with the Reformation, then with the modern philosophers, the approach to the division between *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa* completely changed, and a new model of humanism arrived, that of *Homo faber*. Man was a worker and work was not only power but also production. As a consequence, work occupied a primary place in culture.

In his book *Leisure, the Basis of Culture* Joseph Pieper denounced a labor-centered society. His aim was to rediscover the value of theoretical knowledge in a culture based on technical progress and in a university that paid more attention to sciences and to specialization than to the humanities. In doing so, Pieper proposed an ideal of excellence that brought to mind Greek aristocratic humanism: only the philosopher contemplating the truth can achieve human perfection. Work and ordinary life are usually an obstacle.

2. Two Facts from the Middle Ages

Did the Lutheran approach to work open a cultural revolution at the beginning of the Modern Age? History and sociology do not confirm this thesis. I will refer to two interesting facts that took place in the Middle Ages and provide rich insights about work and ordinary life.

The first is the appearance of universities, exclusive to Western societies and one of the most permanent creations of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In general terms, their characteristics are still present in our days: professors, students, lessons, exams, libraries, etc. A relevant aspect is that the first name of these institutions was *Studia Generalia*, also designated as *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*, a universal wisdom shared by a corporation including both students and professors. Why is this interesting? Because of the etymology of the word *studia*. It is instructive to know that its meaning—to carry out something with effort and take care of it—is quite modern: it appeared around the year 1300 and it revealed not only the use of theoretical reason but also a practical approach to inquiry, a humble attitude to teach or to learn from a master or from a philosophical or theological tradition. It describes the university as a living and interdependent community or corporation. Wisdom was no longer the liberation from the cavern (or of the body) in order to grasp intuitively eternal ideas, as Plato described in *The Republic*. Wisdom was the tentative result of a journey in which professors and students were challenged to put together all their human capacities, theoretical and practical, intellectual and bodily. In other words, to study was to work, and work was a form of systematic craft with a social dimension, leading to the truth.

At the same time, another sociological fact appeared. The Middle Ages was the first epoch in history in which manual labor ceased to be synonymous with slavery. Historical proof of the presence and impact of this in the emergence of European culture can be discovered today in one of its most beautiful inheritances: the Chartres Cathedral in France (Lutan 1999: 91-104).

Indeed, the series of forty-two stained-glass windows (dating back to 1210-1235) was donated by guilds (whereas only thirty-two were offered by the nobility). These guilds chose to illustrate the patrons, by means of narrative representations portraying scenes of their daily working life. A colorful depiction of windows with thirty-three medallions in each, involving figures and events, displays animated episodes of the *vita activa* in concrete images that appeal to the bourgeois taste and fashion (weavers, builders, stone workers, taverners, wine merchants, sculptors, masons

and even shoemakers), very different from the aristocratic emblematic images. A more detailed examination of the several images of the same saint donated by different donors reveals that they played a significant role in deciding upon the formal meaning of the work of art. Guilds not only showed well-determined professional characteristics, but also the cultural influence that they already had in those centuries.

In pointing to these two historical and sociological facts, interesting issues arise. First, human excellence can no longer be identified with a theoretical life at the *polis* or contemplative life in the monastery. Human excellence implies practical and manual activity in ordinary life as well. Secondly, work, even when its goal is to satisfy ordinary needs in everyday circumstances, can be conceived of as a human, and therefore free, activity. In the Age of Antiquity, lack of reason or incapacity of ownership were not essential in order to be slave. It is a well known fact that slaves even owned other slaves and that many men became slaves due to war. The most significant characteristic of slavery was the impossibility of participating in the *polis*, and therefore of not having any kind of influence in culture: the *oikia* was not the place for the *good life* but for *life*. This connotation disappeared in the Middle Ages, because in Christian societies any man or woman could not only achieve a new dignity as a child of God, but as such, and more surprisingly due to their work, they also exerted a quite new influence in culture. Thirdly, and most importantly, those philosophical dichotomies between *otium* and *nec-otium*, liberal arts and servile arts, the contemplative life and the active life, disappeared in the historical and sociological field. Indeed, while philosophy reveals a description of work in terms of its opposition to another reality that, in most cases, is considered superior and more human than physical work, history shows that work in either its “intellectual paradigm”, like the *Studia Generalia*, or in its “manual paradigm”, like all the examples of guilds, can be described as a free craft that expresses the unity of several human abilities and reveals social and cultural influence. Philosophical research has so far explained work mainly as “a shifting notion”, and today this conceptual conflict is still present but in a different way: rational or human work vs. mechanical, industrial or technological work.

As a consequence, when Luther fought for the active life’s supremacy *against* the contemplative life, he interpreted a stream of socially embodied facts that were already present in culture several centuries before him. At the same time, Catholic theology was obliged to insist on the supremacy of the contemplative life. To speak of sanctity through work would raise suspicions of Lutheran heresy. Testimony of this

appears in a book that is extremely controversial, but nonetheless useful for the present study: *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* by Max Weber. The significance of this work that arrived at the 20th century—to put it in a provocative way—was a Protestant victory.

3. Enlightened Reason and the Liberal University

This is not an outdated issue. In a quite recent article and maybe one of his last ones, Ralf Dahrendorf, who has died while the correction of this article, recalls Weber and the “old virtues” of capitalism (work, order, service, duty) as a possible solution to the current economic crisis. The point here is to remember that for Weber, the appearance of these virtues, and therefore of the *spirit of capitalism*, is a contribution of the Lutheran notion of *Beruf* or work, itself related to the primacy of the active life. The Calvinist Reformation and Modern philosophers continued this approach and proposed the disenchantment of the world, understanding this *Beruf* as mainly rational. Human reason had to discover a natural order and to develop a neutral and objective science.

The famous statements of Francis Bacon, “the power of man resides only in science” and “knowledge is power,” opened the door to limitless discoveries in research. This paved the way for the ideal of power over all of creation, instead of fostering an attitude of awe and admiration. Culture experienced seemingly limitless progress. Thomas Hobbes, in turn, made a decisive contribution to the notion of work: society is not born as a consequence of the desire for the good (human being is antisocial, as famously expressed in his statement *homo homini lupus*), but rather as a result of individual interests. Because of this, the unity of society was based on an individualistic approach, and work was seen principally as a means to gain wealth. This theory found its full conceptualization with Adam Smith. Many authors believe that work as a modern reality was discovered at that moment (Méda 1997: 48-51).

This synthesis between science, the technical, and social-economic life established by Modern philosophers was an approach that unleashed the homogenizing of human activities and their goods. Since then, all work began to be significant in terms of monetary value. However, this position presented a structural characteristic which was also its principal defect. It categorized work according to something mainly external: “the product paradigm”. The value of work was measured by its product.

But these theses represented the antipodes of the medieval notion of craft: a notion which privileged an attitude that took care of the object of work or of studies,

because nature was not something abstract, but alive; which was practical, because any craft attended to particular circumstances or particular opinions; and finally, a notion of craft which revealed a social element in the very process of acquiring knowledge, rather than a strictly individualistic approach, i.e. introduced the idea of interdependence within a tradition. On the other hand, modern inquiry developed a notion of work that could be identified with powerful theoretical reason, a drive to control and dominate nature; an individualistic attitude in the worker that became more and more autonomous; and especially, with liberalism, an idea that work had economic value. Every lecture, every piece of research and every assessment had to treat its subject in a purely abstract way. Rationality revealed itself in scientific knowledge.

In modern rationalism, we can find the origin of the liberal university, with its three attributes: a strong specialization, the preeminence of natural sciences and economically-oriented research. An example is the University of Halle, founded in 1694 by the Lutherans, which renounced religious orthodoxy of any kind in favor of rational and objective intellectual inquiry. This new vision focused on abstraction, a pure rational act that could help the new physics and the new progress in mechanics and promoted specialization. We are facing the rise of “instrumental reason,” to borrow Charles Taylor’s famous phrase. In the university curricula, theology above all, but also philosophy and the humanities, were demoted to a secondary place, as approaches to reality that were too comprehensive, as subjects not adaptable to scientific standards, and as activities that were neither economical nor useful. But if this fact shows an idea of the university that differs from its original spirit, it also reveals an even more dangerous consequence: an incomplete, and therefore incorrect, anthropology.

4. The Challenge of Human Excellence in University Studies

Going back to Dahrendorf’s article, we find he encourages a new type of capitalism—which he calls it “responsible”—that implies the inclusion of the community. However, in relating this to the old Protestant virtues that Weber made famous, he fails to mention an important point. Indeed, if we agree with Weber that the core of this old vision is the notion of *Beruf* and, as I have tried to show, that Modern philosophy introduces a meaning of work with a special (and exclusive) emphasis on individual reason and the economic product, then it is difficult to see how Dahrendorf can arrive at a “responsible capitalism” with this in the background.

And if we pay attention to another source of liberalism, i.e. the Cartesian dualism that defines man as isolated reason, then it is not easy to find any social or responsible dimension in capitalism. Work is technique, it is applied theory into reality, regardless of whether this reality is alive or not. And therefore work can transform, destroy or be used for ends that could eventually reveal important mistakes (as in the case of environmental movements that are now denouncing earlier theses). In addition, to admit isolated reason is to leave aside an isolated body. Not only nature is abstract; so too is our body. Nevertheless, reality reveals that every kind of work, whether intellectual or manual, calls to action different senses —sight, hearing, etc.— different bodily capacities —memory, imagination, attention, manual abilities— and also different uses of reason —theoretical or practical, while practical reason is something different from technical reason (as we are going to see in a moment). Work cannot be conceived as independent of a coherent anthropology that includes the living body. Modern rationalism has not only avoided this point, but cannot accept it.

More importantly, this implies the achievement of internal good as the primary result of the complex act of working. This is the innovative point that challenges the notion of work under the “product paradigm” that extends into our culture through liberalism, and is the principal obstacle for Dahrendorf’s “responsible capitalism”. Following Alasdair MacIntyre’s account on practices (1984: 182 ff.), intrinsic goods are different from external goods. Examples of external goods are money, power, honor, or pleasure. On the other hand, internal goods imply that the worker learns a theory (some kinds of work require this more than others), and acquires a know-how that is part of a tradition (this is also true for intellectual activities) and that contributes to culture. This process takes place within a community that shares these skills, has standards for good work, and gives work social significance. It becomes evident, therefore, that progress is not only a question of scientific reason, or of applied science, but also of practical reason.

Aristotle defined practical reason as *recta ratio* (*orthós lógos*) (1145 a 26-28), or reason which corrects and is corrected. Its object is not eternal and universal truth (the object of theoretical reason), but the particular and contingent. Due to the nature of its object, practical reason does not always reach its objective the first time around. It involves the ability to reflect upon one’s judgments and those of others, so that one becomes able to correct errors. This capacity to correct reveals that every labor has standards of excellence, and that a learning process is necessary. Thus, although the

product of a concrete labor can be a masterpiece, it can also be the result of mere chance. As Matthew Crawford has written, “the craftsman’s habitual deference is not toward the New, but toward the distinction between the Right Way and the Wrong Way” (2006: 10).

Another characteristic of internal goods is that they ordinarily depend on the type of practice performed. Painters develop color perception better than cooks, but cooks have a better sense of taste than painters. For manual laborers, skills entail systematic contact with reality, a respectful dialogue with the natural world, a disciplined perception, a control of movement, etc. Intellectual work shares some of these internal goods, too, but develops others —such as the capacity to relate ideas, the ability to go in depth into a problem and discover possible contradictions (and solutions), etc.— and these skills are acquired in different ways by philosophers, historians or economists.

Also of importance in these intellectual tasks is the ability to explain them in a comprehensible language, to deal with contrary ideas in a tolerant and open way, to receive criticism and to learn from it. Manual and intellectual work can be performed in an autonomous way, but good manual and intellectual work have to be intrinsically social: they start within a community, build up a cultural tradition in cooperation with other practitioners, and they improve their standards when there is loyal confrontation and the generous capacity to share the best results.

Universities have all the conditions to be that community, but they have to rediscover some anthropological work principles. Studying, doing research, and teaching are types of work that can be called “crafts” (MacIntyre 1990). We are not intuitive spirits that grasp the truth individually or automatically. Even the best practitioners at the university need struggle, concentration, time, and also help, support, good teachers or good co-workers in order to gain knowledge. This recalls the original meaning of the words *Studia generalia*, that is, to look for the truth with human effort, and in a social way: deeply (taking into consideration subjects that are fundamental such humanities), totally (attending to the different traditions or theories), sincerely (searching for the truth, although it may change some personal achievements).

To claim that university practices are a sort of craft may sound like a second-class type of work, but whoever thinks so does not recognize the implicit, frequent and old prejudice of our culture, that of the dichotomy between *otium* and *nec-otium*. This prejudice is present in the Greek aristocratic humanism (only citizens are human) and in

the modern rationalism (we are only reason; only science is true knowledge). However, as we have seen, in both approaches there are some anthropological gaps that the notion of craft helps to correct. Indeed, it offers an image of a human being that flourishes not only while exercising his or her intellectual capacities in the public sphere, but also attending to everyday life circumstances with the participation of his or her bodily structure. Work as craft has little to do with power or with dominion, but with care as a result of an attitude that is only human: empathy. This notion of craft challenges individualism, because in order to exist it needs to be built on traditions, on other practitioners that teach a practical way to acquire the craft, and therefore develop social interdependence and service. For this reason the notion of craft could be a good expression for studies that are not centered around sciences, technology or marketing.

Last but not least, this approach presents university practices as the point and function of virtues. Academics and students need virtues such as perseverance in work and patience with others, generosity toward co-workers, sincerity in research, justice to students, friendship and service to companions, loyalty to the community. Consequently, it can be claimed that in order to achieve university excellence, virtues are necessary, and virtues are the result of the acquisition of the skills that belong to this craft.

When students and professors within the university focus on internal goods rather than good marks or prices and results that bring honor and money, then they do not fall into the trap of work seen within the product paradigm. On the contrary, while teaching or studying they acquire those virtues that enable them to flourish as a member of that university. But a correct anthropology goes further, because if they want to move towards their specifically human *telos*, then they cannot forget that they have other roles in society that are also part of their excellence as human beings, even if they belong to everyday matters. Only by attending to all these aspects can both professors and students move toward their happiness.

I know that these last ideas need to be further developed. Fortunately, this explanation has been afforded by the best treatise on human happiness ever written: Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Followers of Ralf Dahrendorf should definitely read it.

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