The Beginning of History and the University

Bryan McAllister-Grande

The word “truth” features prominently in the mission statements of the International Association of Universities, the United Nations, and other post-World War II organizations. “Truth” also appears in the official mottoes of many universities: Harvard’s simple *Veritas* (“Truth”), National University of the South’s elegant *Ardua Veritatem* (“Through the difficulties to the truth”), Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Campinas’ celebratory *Fide Splendet et Scientia* (“May it shine with truth and knowledge”), Tianjin University’s practical 实事求是 (“seeking truth from facts”). Yet, “truth” is an elusive concept. This essay argues that a new history of the university and truth is required. A new history of truth will explore the idea from pluralistic perspectives, not the monolithic and all-powerful “Truth” of the twentieth century and those centuries before it.

A new history of truth would also wrestle honestly with the ways in which universities have sacrificed truth-seeking to ideology. Previous histories of universities have too often lauded their autonomy and freedom from the world and society. A mystique and aura dominate these gilded narratives. Adopting a more radically empirical lens, university leaders and scholars should investigate the ways in which truth has been corrupted by powerful forces of religion, nationalism, and colonial forces disguised as “internationalism.”

This essay explores three distinct eras and contexts; each example demonstrates new thinking on the relationship between truth and ideology. In the first example, recent histories have unearthed an old claim that the ancient academies (of Plato, Aristotle, and other giants of philosophy) were rife with early racism and classism. In the second, the so-called “golden age” of university Scholasticism and the subsequent transition to Renaissance Humanism is explored; in the third, I draw a line

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© The Author(s) 2021
H. van’t Land et al. (eds.), *The Promise of Higher Education*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-67245-4_26

between Puritan dreams in the American colonies and Anglo-American commitments to Christian Humanism. Finally, I outline three steps toward achieving a new set of histories of universities and truth.

1 The Ancient Academies and the “Unity of Truth” Ideal

Scholars and experts have often lauded the ancient academies of Plato, Aristotle, and other great figures as innocent and pure. The “canon” discussions often begin with the “Ancients.” On the other hand, “moderns” (like Karl Popper) have often painted ancients as dusty relics or, worse, as fascist dictators. This extreme stance against ancients (either celebratory or derogatory) has shrouded us from achieving a more balanced, empirical examination of the classical centres of learning. These early institutions were the forebears of colleges and universities today – so it is doubly important that we understand their origins, their purposes, and, yes, relevant ideologies that guided or influenced their lauded attempt to “search for truth.”

While little empirical evidence survives the rages of cultural and physical destruction, scholars still must explore the ideals and realities that drove these academies. For instance, historians, philosophers, and archaeologists could collaborate to better synthesize the schools of thought that intersected with political economies in the ancient world. Plato’s Academy was a haven of both philosophical Scepticism and Idealism. Both philosophies attacked the Stoic “dogma” that sense impressions (what we now call science) could give accurate knowledge of the universe. Philosophers have well documented these competing philosophical schools of thought, but they have not always connected them with political ideals or ideologies.

This situation, too, is partly a product of the “search for truth.” Modern giants such as Marx and John Dewey – caught in their own intellectual cold wars – were eager to pin “ideology” to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet, ideology – a system of ideals and ideas that informs policy – has existed since the birth of humanity and society. Scholars can connect the history of knowledge to ideological aims and draw lines to the modern era. Indeed, Ibram X. Kendi, in his celebrated *Stamped from the Beginning: A Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (2016: 17), ties American and global slavery directly back to the Greek idea of power and control. Casting Aristotle in racial terms, Kendi writes that Aristotle “situated the Greeks...as the most beautifully endowed superior rulers and enslavers of the world,” and that Greek ideas of Idealism and knowledge pointed at a teleological goal: domination over the what Aristotle himself called the “burnt faces” of Africa. Scholars can follow lines of thought as they intersected with political and humanistic goals and formed policy in both the ancient and modern worlds.

Chief among these ideals was the one of the “Unity of Truth.” This Idealistic ideal, promoted by Plato and his followers (especially the followers known as Neo-Platonists), argued that all truth and facts (including what we now call spiritual or divine truths) are united into a single system. Such a belief had multiple goals, including disciplinary (all disciplines are united in a single system of knowledge),

religious (all beings are united by a prime mover or god), and political (all subjects are united under a philosopher-king or set of philosopher-kings, a popular Platonic idea). Yet, histories of the Unity of Truth ideal are few and far between. A new history of truth will also be a history of knowledge, a history of learning, and those crucial intersections between knowledge, faith, race/empire, and politics – especially the Unity of Truth ideal.

In addition, the Platonic and Aristotelian academies were obviously not the only ancient academies. Similar and diverse examples existed in China's Tang Dynasty, Korea's Joseon Dynasty, Rome (the Imperial University of Constantinople), India (for example, Nalanda University), and ancient Iran/Persia (such as Gondishapur University). Ideals of the "Unity of Truth" animated these academies and spiritual centres, especially the idea that faith and knowledge (science) were two sides of the same coin. Similarly, these universities were part of religious and ideological structures associated with centres of power and politics. Again, while physical and archaeological evidence is slight, efforts to excavate and study these institutions – in an interdisciplinary fashion – are too few and hampered by lack of funding and political interference.

2 Truth in the Age of Scholasticism and the Role of Catholicism

Similarly, scholars must produce updated understandings of the Middle Ages and the Age of Scholasticism, when Europeans created the famous universities of Paris, Bologna, Oxford, and others. In our histories of higher education, scholars write as if these early universities were truly "international" because those Scholastic scholars spoke a "universal" language (Latin), featured regular exchange of scholars and students, and had similar methodologies – namely, the Scholastic dialectic that helped lay the foundations for modern natural science as well as the humanities (then unified under a single study, called "philology"). Indeed, much of romantic idealism associated with the word "Truth" and the association of truth with universities derives from this Scholastic era. In this era, historians often claimed, benevolent and humble scholars searched for truth without much influence from the outside world. Their method – the detached, "objective," methodology of the dialectic – still holds some sway in our conceptions of research as being unbiased or pure. The image of universities as "ivory towers" derives, in part, from this era. Much of the work on these universities was due to the Neo-Thomistic (Thomism refers to the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, a key Scholastic thinker) revival in the 1930s and 1940s. At that time, world-renowned Catholic scholars such as Jacques Maritain and Étienne Henri Gilson helped popularize the image of a dusty Scholasticism as a modern symbol of the "pure" and "international" university scholar that still persists today. Not only does this intense focus on Scholasticism overshadow non-Western and non-European institutions, it also presents an image of the pure "ivory tower" that is misleading.

As the historian of science Steve Shapin (2012: 1) observes, “There never was an Ivory Tower. It was always a figure of speech. There are towers and there is ivory, both quite real; it is their combination in the idea of an Ivory Tower which is both imaginary and consequential.” Our ideas of the Scholastic era are outdated; and, similar to the ancient era, filled with either lofty praise or blanket criticism.

We can better understand the commitments and ideas during this crucial time period of Scholasticism, when many of the familiar structures of modern universities – such as disciplines, research methodologies, terminologies, traditions, and approaches to knowledge – were conceived of and formulated. Scholars can better search for the origins of their disciplines by grasping the complex differences in methodologies between various forms of Scholasticism. We must also seek to trouble the notion that these universities were inherently international/universal and better connect them to the burgeoning empires of Europe. Finally, scholars can overcome what was once imagined as a large break between Scholasticism and its successor philosophy in Europe, Renaissance Humanism. At one time, intellectuals perceived a fairly wide chasm between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance; now, these pre-modern eras are better seen as ideologically, politically, and intellectually connected.

The term “Scholasticism” itself should be studied intensely. The word formally means the organization of knowledge in a systematic and unified fashion; our modern notion of the “scholar” who studies a subject intensely derives from this usage. In addition, what Americans know as “majors” and others know as “course” or “specialism” derives largely from this era. Ideologically, we might better understand – without bias or undue criticism – the linkages between this organization of knowledge and the various branches of Catholicism that animated those desires to organize thought.

3 Christian Humanism – The Anglo-American Unity of Truth

As Renaissance Humanism transitioned to new realities created by empire, war, and the modern advent of democracy, a utilitarian-inspired Christian Humanism – and its associated religion called “Protestantism” – took shape in Britain and the American colonies. Intersecting with the dawn of modern Capitalism, this utilitarian Christian Humanism favoured the natural sciences for predicting accurate and universal renderings of truth. It also allowed more “particularistic” viewpoints ascendant in Protestantism and Renaissance Humanism to flourish. Thus, we get the modern balance in many Western universities between a product-oriented science and literary studies, which, in contrast, favours deeply contextual studies of the human condition.

Christian Humanism should be studied as *the* major philosophy/ideology of American higher education. It coincided with the growth of both Capitalism as a political economy and the birth of Utilitarianism as an Anglo-American political philosophy. Early ideas about Christian Humanism philosophy/ideology emerged with the

English Restoration; one major figure was Robert Boyle, the Anglo-Irish natural philosopher and founder of the modern experimental method in science. Not only did Boyle establish the foundations of modern chemistry, but he also helped promote Christian Humanist philosophies throughout the English colonies. Boyle sat on the original Council for Foreign Plantations in 1660, which was commissioned concurrently with the Royal Society to centralize and advise the vast empire that Charles II inherited (Kendi 2016: 46). As Kendi notes, Boyle believed that the “physics of light” showed the “whiteness” was the “chiefest color”; much of his work was deployed to advance both scientific production and the notion that certain biological and physical characteristics were “preferred” rather than natural or heredity (this was deemed “progressive” at the time, but was clearly racist). A scientist who was heavily influenced by Boyle, Isaac Newton, carried forward Boyle’s experiments in “Optiks” to conclude that “white” was at the very centre of all colours and all things – a kind of “ether” ordering the universe and the qualities of light, from which all other things could be judged.

Another key figure of Anglo-American Christian Humanism was the English Puritan theologian William Ames, whose works helped form the early curriculum of Harvard and Yale universities. Ames was one of the leaders of an effort to make morality or “the unity of truth” itself *scientific* – in the sense that it could be studied by observing particular cases in “natural” habitats. Ames was also a racial ideologue who claimed that “blood kin” was superior to all others and that “free men” (meaning white men) should have superiority over those who were inferior. Much of his and later utilitarian writings were designed to show the superiority of Protestant, white ways of life, science, literature, and habits.

In the nineteenth century, most educated Americans read another Utilitarian and Christian Humanist writer, the scientist William Paley. His books *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785) and *Natural Theology, or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity* (1809) both promoted Utilitarianism as a political and moral philosophy, and attempted to prove the existence of an active, intervening, and highly practical Christian God. Paley’s works made the claim that the Christian God and natural science were aligned; he thus gave a new definition of the “unity of truth” as the (maybe imperfect) union of Protestant Christianity and experimental science. Paley used the now-famous analogy of the “watchmaker” to explain this union; he explained that like a watchmaker, who must make all the pieces fit and work together, God acted like a primer move or Newton’s “ether” to stitch together the diverse particularities of nature and humanity.

4 The Present Day

Lest we think that these are historical examples, more present-day issues can be examined. The efforts of nationalists/populists governments to undermine universities and science is not a random occurrence, but, rather, a coordinated ideological

strategy. It is a productive strategy, too – productive in the sense that it has worked in prior eras.

5 New Histories

New histories of universities could be both “bigger” in scope and far more particularistic and balanced in historical method. Instead of lauding universities as bastions of purity or condemning them as evil, scholars can join together to understand universities as flawed institutions. Scholars can connect the dots between Unity of Truth ideas throughout spaces and places, understanding how those ideals led to both research breakthroughs and as covers for ideological and racial control. More so, new histories of truth and universities could and should unlock new potentiality for what our institutions can achieve when collaboration, not competition, is the goal. Nothing less than the fate of the world is at stake.

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