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The University and Morality

A Revised Approach to University Autonomy and Its Limits

The problem of the "university and morality" has been a recurrent one in the Western world ever since the university stopped being an institution of clerical dispensation. It will continue to be one as long as universities do not become ideological handmaidens of the state. The problem is created by the process of social differentiation itself. Once the university becomes specialized in its cultural aims, once it loses the legitimation of church and state, the question inevitably arises: what should the morality of the university be?

The search for an answer to this question is unending. It is only asked, indeed, insofar as the university has given up claims to justification by a clear-cut particular moral creed, that is, when a reassuring, once-and-for-all answer to the question cannot, in fact, be made. There are certain historical periods, however, when at least a provisional answer must be given. In these times, the question, "what is the morality of the university?" becomes more urgently asked, and the responses are stridently forthcoming. The 1960s was the last such period when the question was raised, mainly by the New Left. We have now entered another period in which the question is being raised, this time particularly by opponents of South African apartheid. In this essay I develop an initial answer to the question of university and morality. It provides a revised framework for thinking about contemporary issues and also indicates a way of thinking about the long-term processes involved.

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In the argument about the university and morality two main positions have been advanced. Proponents of the first position argue that because the university is scientifically specialized, it is not a moral institution, for the only way to be moral is to be committed to a clear-cut, particular moral creed. To be morally committed in this way leads to direct involvement in political conflicts. The logical conclusion of this argument is that, if the university is to become moral, it must align itself directly with a particular creed and a political cause. Historically, this argument has been made by conservatives and radicals. I will call it the "critical position."

Those who have advanced the second position agree that the university is not "moral" in the sense of being committed to any particular moral creed. They argue, however, that because technical specialization is socially productive in many different ways, it is morally justifiable. The logical conclusion of this argument is that the university must be disengaged from moral creeds and political commitments. Historically, this argument has been made by liberals. I will call it the "established position." Max Weber [6] advanced a strong case for it in the turn-of-the-century period, and Talcott Parsons [2] elaborated this position in the postwar climate. Derek Bok [1] has formulated the established position in the context of the renewal of controversy in the present day.

This conflict between critical and established positions raises the following questions. Does the university have an obligation to take explicit ethical or political positions vis-a-vis the society at large? If the university chooses to remain disengaged, is its position in society a moral one? How might a morality of disengagement be justified? Are there limits or conditions to a disengagement position? Although these questions raise issues of justice and political obligation, they cannot be answered in a purely abstract way. To achieve what Rawls [3] has called "reflective equilibrium," every theory of justice must be tempered by an empirical assessment of actual possibilities and by a sensibility that respects the commitments particular to each social sphere [4].

To answer these questions in a responsible manner we must begin with the internal structure and values of the university. Everything that is said about the university and society comes back to questions about the university itself, about the desirability of maintaining the integrity of its internal processes, and about whether in doing so special obligations to society are entailed.

I will begin by affirming the contention of the established position that the technical specialization of the university is morally justified. Although the moral justification derives from the utilitarian consequences of scientific specialization — the greatest good for the greatest number — it

must be pointed out that this utility itself rests upon a normative base: the technical specialization in science can be achieved only if its practitioners allow themselves to be regulated by the impersonal morality of cognitive rationality [2]. I will suggest later, indeed, that this cognitive specialization is itself deceptive, and that in practice it is combined with rationality of a more evaluative, value-specific kind. At this point, however, I will explore the nature and utility of cognitive rationality itself.

The notion that academic life is governed by cognitive rationality is upheld by sophisticated proponents of the established position and by ideologists of the university alike. To uphold cognitive rationality is to create impersonal standards of judgment and evaluation, standards that give decisive power to what is agreed at any particular point to be empirical truth. Insofar as society becomes secular, bureaucratic, and egalitarian, such impersonal standards become increasingly central. To be cognitively rational is to possess expert knowledge. The bureaucratic form of organization is based upon expert knowledge. The expertise of officials who direct bureaucracies is legitimated by the value of cognitive rationality. This is the argument from efficiency, but there is a fairness argument as well. Cognitive rationality is a norm to which all have access; its abstraction promotes inclusion and allows the truth to be contested by all.

Although cognitive rationality takes different forms in different disciplines, in each one it maintains its universalistic form. In the humanities and natural sciences there are rules of evidence which everywhere apply, rules about verification and falsification and standards of what constitutes legitimate explanations and interpretations. In the ideal-type case, these rationality rules apply to every member of the university community, to students and faculty alike. They govern the allocation of prestige, money, and power within the university and, in principle, the allocation of everything that is relevant to the academic occupational sphere.

It is a tremendous historical achievement to have institutionalized such an elusive and impersonal norm, one that so often violates tradition, challenges authority, and constrains personal impulse while abnegating any particular moral creed or political belief. Of course, this norm has never been fully accepted or continuously applied. The university exists in real life, and the organizational and personal exigencies of real life make particularism impossible to stamp out.

Still, cognitive rationality is not only the formal but the practical norm of the university. Whether its scope can be expanded depends, in the first place, on whether it can be maintained. Cognitive rationality can be maintained only by the collegial, self-governing structure of faculty control.

The special integrative and allocative processes of academic life must be protected from other standards more representative of community, student body, or state. If these other group interests intervene — no matter in how well-meaning a way — the delicate mechanisms for sustaining cognitive rationality can easily break down.

It seems obvious that the best way to protect these standards of rationality is for the university to remain completely agnostic regarding power and value conflicts in the "outside" world. What follows from this is the strong argument for university autonomy. Autonomy, it is argued, must be absolute because the rationality which governs the university is purely cognitive. What academics do — the kind of rationality they pursue — is completely different than what people do in the outside world. Therefore, let us not bother them and they will not bother us. This liberal position, formulated by Weber and Parsons and forcefully argued by Harvard's Bok, has provided the justification for university inaction in the present period.

This is a serious position, for which much can be said, and I accept it in important respects. I suspect, however, that in this strong form the autonomy defense fails because, ironically, it is too easy to make. It underestimates the forces with which university autonomy must contend. When the autonomy position is stated, the question immediately arises why, after all, anybody would want to intervene in such a purely cognitive community, a community concerned only with the pursuit of empirical truth. There are, of course, religious and political fundamentalists of the left and right who do oppose scientific rationality. But the influence of these groups has shrunk significantly in the twentieth century, and even now, despite the right-wing revival, fundamentalists are not the principal actors in ideological debate. The same kind of question, moreover, can be asked of those inside the university as of those without. Why should the members of such a purely cognitively rational university want to make any social commitments anyway? If they are concerned only with empirical truth, what is all the fuss about? After all, they are still citizens, and they have ample opportunity to pursue political commitments outside the university context.

I will argue that this strong version of autonomy cannot be maintained and wish to support university autonomy on very different grounds and in a much more qualified way. The different grounds lead to the consideration of areas and occasions where autonomy cannot hold. I will outline my "revised autonomy" position by introducing three problems I have with the established position described above.

The first problem concerns the notion of purely cognitive rationality. Although this notion certainly characterizes one special and distinctive

dimension of the university, it does not describe academic life in an ample enough way. What the members of the university really pursue is not empirical but value rationality. Here I take over Weber's term but use it in a slightly different sense. Scientific rationality is not neutral but also committed. It is not only concerned with truth in a cognitive sense but with truth in the moral sense. The faculty accept the discipline of cognitive rationality, of being true to the nature of the empirical world. Within the confines of this discipline, however, academics pursue substantive, a priori, political and cultural values. It is because of their simultaneously evaluative and cognitive thrust that the term value-rationality holds.

Despite their commitment to cognitive rationality, then, the university faculty produce enormously value-laden, particularistic arguments. Their aim — and the ambiguity is intended — is to rationalize their values. Academics support constitutionalism, they do not only explain constitutions. They oppose or seek to contribute to revolutions; they do not simply analyze their course. They support or condemn urban renewal; they do not merely analyze the costs it entails. They champion secularism; they do not simply explain evolution.

The nonempirical commitments that inevitably form and inform rational scholarly debate, then, go beyond the explanatory presuppositions to which recent postpositivist philosophers and historians of science have pointed; they extend to ideological evaluations of the world. The university is not only a place for cognitive science; it is also a central place for ideological debate. Academic books and articles form the intellectual basis for political conflict in the modern world. Those who are outside the walls of the university — the William F. Buckleys, the George Wills — are popular but not intellectual ideologues. Although the university is certainly the primary source of objective expertise in modern life, this knowledge is not as abstracted and cognitive as both the critical and established positions assume. Particularly in the humanities and the social sciences, but in subtle ways often in the natural sciences as well, scientific knowledge is connected to the expression of particular political and cultural values.

Only now can we see the extent of the moral problem that the modern university faces, for what is taken to be the epistemology of academic work, becomes, inevitably, the basis for judgments of what should be its political stance. It is not nearly so easy to maintain the strong autonomy argument when we realize that activities of the university are to an important extent ideological and, indirectly, political. In this sense Parsons [2] was wrong. The university does not simply lend its rationality to an institutionally separated value realm, informing the work of intellectuals (a few of whom are academics) who define themselves in an explicitly

ideological way. Weber [5] errs in much the same way. He defends the independent vocation of the university by limiting scientific rationality to technical knowledge that defines means but not ends, to purposive rationality, or *Zweckrationalität*. Because Weber limits value-rationality, or *Wertrationalität*, to actions which are morally absolutist and do not accept the discipline of cognitive rationality, he cannot conceive the actual intermixing that defines the modern university. Bok's case for strong autonomy is too easily made for the same reason. He [2, p. 20] describes university activity simply as "the search for knowledge and new discovery," i.e., as concerned only with objective, cognitively rational knowledge. I would suggest, to the contrary, that the real university is a dangerously political place.

But if we accept the value basis of academic activity, does the argument follow that the university is not and should not be autonomous? I believe it does not. Here I will introduce my second departure from the established position. My first departure concerned what the university does; the second one concerns what the university is. It is simplistic to speak of "the university," for there are really two universities; or at least it should be said that the university — like the medieval kings of old — has two bodies. There is the corporate institution — the legal body, which answers to the state or to a private group — and the collegium of the faculty. Because of its value rationality, the faculty body is never insulated from society, nor should it try to be. The corporate body of the university must, however, behave in a quite different manner from the collegium. The corporate university should seek to insulate itself as thoroughly as possible from any social commitment. In order to do so, its spokespersons usually employ an ideological ruse, presenting the university as concerned only with cognitive rationality. Although these spokespersons may be perfectly sincere in this presentation, it remains a form of false consciousness, even if an extremely useful one. When critical outsiders counter that academic work does take value positions, spokespersons for the corporate body argue for objective rationality in a slightly altered way. In the process of producing objective knowledge, they suggest, reasonable scientists can often disagree. It is the free pursuit of knowledge, not the connection between knowledge and value, which leads to disagreement. The argument for autonomy rests, in this way, on the need for cognitive rather than ideological pluralism.

Yet even if this cognitive fig leaf is discarded, the argument for autonomy can still be made. It must simply be made in a different and ultimately more restricted fashion. The pressures on the corporate university for political commitment — moral pressures from faculty, students, and the

public — are enormous. For those inside and outside the university the citizenship of the faculty cannot easily be separated from their intellectual vocations. These pressures only make all the more urgent the necessity for the corporate university to desist from commitment to particular values or interests. In a complex and contentious society, to adopt a particular position is to open the university to powerful political and cultural attack. Such attacks will eventually seek to restrict the faculty's freedom of thought. This sounds like the established position, but it differs in its rationale. It is to protect ideological particularism that the university must remain ideologically neutral. It is to encourage ideological communication that the corporate body must refrain from itself participating in ideological communication.

The political neutrality I am describing is clearly a "compromised position," not simply a "compromise position." Weber pointed out that the purity of moral absolutism is very short lived. A responsible vocation is always a rational compromise between ideals and reality. The regrettable fact is that the university must be willing to tolerate unpleasant and sometimes downright evil social facts without taking a corporate position against them. There can be no such thing as a pristine university untouched by the world's evil. Like Shaw's clergyman, the university must either share the world's guilt or go to another planet. It is not only absurd to ask the university to embody only good and holy things, it is sociologically naive and politically counterproductive.

At this point I wish to introduce my third reservation about the established position, just when it would seem that I am endorsing so much of it. The university should not make autonomy into a universal, abstract principle that holds good for all occasions, for autonomy is not an end in itself but a pragmatic protection. Corporate commitments are renounced so that powerful extra-university forces will not be legitimated in taking a position against the ideological discourse of the faculty collegium. But what if it is impossible for the university not to take a position, what if certain conditions in the external society, no matter what the university does, thrust a position upon it? The established position views this question as an exotic possibility, a topic for speculation; President Bok refers, for example [1, p. 265], to the "extraordinary circumstances" of German universities in the 1930s. I suggest, to the contrary, that the question of social commitments is, even in its limited version, an issue that is vital for the life and health of every university today and for the society in which it seeks not only to live but thrive.

There are two kinds of occasion which thrust a commitment upon the university, the subjective and the objective one. The subjective occasion

is less clear-cut and, therefore, more easily obscured in contemporary debate. It goes back to the evaluative character of internal academic discussion. In every society, powerful moral feelings sometimes develop within the public, which make a particular issue take on overriding importance. In such times of political and cultural polarization, a moral decision is eventually made, whether or not any institutional step actually occurs. As citizens of their societies, faculty share the widespread moral feelings, and because of the inherently ideological dimension of their activity, these feelings are significant factors in motivating their work. However these controversial issues are resolved, the moral motivation of the faculty is powerfully affected. When significant enough, therefore, moral controversy can deeply affect the internal operation of the university itself. To defend itself, on these occasions the corporate university must make particular moral commitments.

The objective occasion is more obvious, but not less important for that. Cultural and political polarization will often result in politically coercive powers threatening to impinge on the university in both its forms. As compared to the subjective situation, on these occasions university autonomy is jeopardized without motivated action on the university's part. Either the government seeks to force the university to adopt a certain organizational position or the university is faced with a situation in which other major social institutions upon whom it depends will be forced to do so. In the latter case, continued university neutrality is simply commitment by another name, for a neutral university passively throws its weight behind whichever side has the most political power. In either case, autonomy will be effectively set aside and commitment will occur without the university having chosen for itself.

Before becoming more specific about how the university might initiate responsive value commitments in such situations, I would like to make two brief points. Both underscore what Weber would call the university's ethic of responsibility rather than conviction. First, the corporate university must never take the lead in seeking to advance substantive commitments. The need to make a commitment must be thrust upon it. The university acts negatively, to preserve itself. Second, the justification for university commitment is an extremely relativistic, situational one. There are no issues that inherently violate the university's ethical vocation to society. Even anti-Semitism and racism in the larger society cannot be viewed as automatic commitment-producing facts. For the university, every commitment is a dangerous one; it should be undertaken only when threats to university functioning are unavoidable. Thus, in a consensually racist society—the American South in the antebellum period

for example — for the university to make an issue out of affirmative action would only succeed in rupturing the university/society relation. The result would undermine the ability of its less racist faculty to advocate the very ideology that corporate action had been taken to uphold. By contrast, in a society deeply divided over racism — American society in the 1960s, for example — a similar neutrality about racial recruiting would place the corporate university at odds not only with powerful faculty sentiment but with significant institutional forces in the society and state.

When social commitments cannot be avoided, what are the criteria the university should employ to choose sides? What are the mechanisms, moreover, by which the general will of the university can come to be expressed? The university must align itself with whichever position more clearly supports the principle of value-rationality. There are certain social conditions upon which the pursuit of such evaluative rationality clearly depends. First, there must be substantial intellectual freedom, that is, freedom of thought. Second, there must be intellectual self-regulation, that is, as much academic control as possible over the conditions of academic work. Third, there must be full intellectual communication, that is, the widest possible opportunities for the exchange of ideas.

In times which demand corporate value commitment, then, the university must act to increase freedom and control and to extend the scope of communication, for these conditions are the basis of the value-rationality it seeks to defend. The university lives off commitments to value-rationality in the general population. It does, of course, contribute to the attractiveness of this value by the vigor of the way its faculty exemplify it. There are also occasions, however, when the university must defend the conditions of value-rationality directly.

There can be no formal rules that determine when the conditions of value-rationality must be defended. What is involved is a sociological process, a process of opinion formation which gradually crystallizes the collegium's public will. The dynamics of this process proceed from the fact that the collegium is composed of intellectuals who are also value-committed citizens. Yet while formal rules are impossible, formal procedures might be desirable. Presently, the only group legally empowered to formalize university commitments to the outside world is the corporate governing board, composed almost exclusively of nonacademic and non-student personnel. It is clear, of course, that this board does not control intra-university commitments. Ownership and control are separated in the academic world as they are in the corporate one. Moreover, there is a clear rationale for the nonacademic nature of such governing boards. They represent the society's fiduciary interest in overseeing academic work.

They may not, however, be nearly so effective at representing the university's own interests vis-a-vis society.

The nonacademic and nonstudent nature of university governing boards often makes them too timid or too aggressive in deciding the relationship between university and society. Why? Because they themselves are not deeply in touch with the value-rationality which the university must protect. Because of this, dangerous situations can arise, situations in which university interests are threatened in ways which nonacademic governing boards could not have foreseen. Formalized faculty and student input, by contrast, could alert the corporate community to impending threats to the conditions for value-rationality and to the need to establish social commitments to defend against them. Formal and explicit advisory powers should be assigned to student bodies and faculty senates, according to which a vote by a certain percentage would require that an issue be discussed and eventually voted upon by university governing boards.

Once again, my position may be contrasted with the established one. President Bok notes the extensive Harvard faculty debate about the Vietnam War, but he dismisses the discussion as burdensome and time-consuming [1, pp. 248–53]. This observation fails to appreciate, however, the close affinity between such discussions and "real" academic work. It also fails to see the need for a sociological rather than formal approach to university/society commitment. Whether such discussions are burdensome must be left to the sensibilities of the faculty to decide. As a rule, they will devote extraordinary time only in extraordinary circumstances. It is just such circumstances, of course, that may call for corporate university commitment. Obviously, such expressions of intra-university will may not finally decide the regents' or overseers' vote. A strongly felt issue, however, could come up again, and the reiteration of such a theme would send a powerful message to the extra-university community from which the governing boards arise.

The foregoing outlines a theoretical perspective within which the general issue of university-society relations may be reconsidered. In my conclusion, I will briefly consider how this perspective might be useful in thinking about issues in the present day.

According to my earlier argument, threats to value-rationality can activate university commitment in one of two ways. On the one hand, there can be objective, coercive action which arouses the faculty collegium and the students. On the other hand, there can be a subjective threat, which, although not producing an institutional challenge, activates commitment because the moral feelings of the faculty collegium are perceived by them to be threatened in a fundamental way. Equally real limitations of value-

rational discourse may occur, of either an objective or a moral type. They will not create or justify university commitment, however, if they do not arouse the indignation of the faculty collegium itself.

Consider, for example, the history of the university's commitment to affirmative action. Here the university faced a direct government policy, which, if it had not acted, would have committed it passively. Faced with this objective reality, the university decided to implement affirmative action on its own rather than to stall compliance. It did so, I believe, in accordance with the stricture to expand intellectual communication. The range of value-rational discourse in the university is inhibited by racially tinged hiring and admissions, just as it once was by anti-Semitic barriers. Now, it has been argued by conservative opponents of this commitment that this step beyond autonomy undermined one of the other bases of value-rational discourse, namely, intellectual self-regulation. The committed university has responded that it has merely broadened its own criteria for employment, not abandoned self-control, and it has everywhere sought to keep direct government intervention outside of even affirmative academic hiring. The commitment to maintaining all the conditions for value-rational discourse has, indeed, been the principal source of contention between university and government in arguments over university compliance with racial guidelines.

Although university commitment to affirmative action was made in the face of an objective constraint, it occurred against the background of a giant movement of public opinion. This movement raised the racial consciousness of American citizens, and it was as citizens that faculty, students, and administrators made this particular objective constraint a major issue. By contrast, the university's reaction to government-imposed penalties for those who failed to register for the draft—recently lifted—indicates a very different situation.

This latter threat by the government certainly constituted an equally objective situation, an attempt by coercive powers to force the university into a political commitment of great importance, into support for the draft and, indirectly, for American foreign policy. This coercively produced support ran directly contrary to the condition of self-regulation upon which value-rational discussion is based. To enforce draft registration, the government took federal financial aid away from graduate and undergraduate students who failed to comply. By supplying records to the federal government, universities forced students to indicate whether or not they had registered. In so doing, universities acquiesced to policies which undermined their ability to allocate rewards according to purely scientific criteria. In the sociology department at UCLA, for example, an excellent

graduate student was substantially delayed in his dissertation research because his work-study grant was withdrawn when he failed to register.

In this recent case of draft registration, the university has maintained its neutrality but has been forced to assume a position passively. Why the contrast with its actions on affirmative action? Because it is the sociological process of opinion formation which decides which threat to value-rationality will be crystallized. In the midst of the great popular upheaval of the 1960s, major universities refused to comply with government pressures to enforce draft laws. The change in public consciousness in the 1980s makes this commitment "unnecessary." Because students are not fighting in an unpopular war, the draft has not aroused the collective conscience of faculty or students. The issue does not "feel" like a critical one to the members of the university community. Hence it is not, in fact, an issue in which commitment becomes a sociological necessity.

Since World War II, powerful interconnections have developed between universities and defense work, both private and public, and more recently growing connections have emerged between universities and biotechnology industries. In both cases, it seems clear, the self-regulation of the collegium is restricted. When the corporate university allows such economic and technological relations to be established, scientists cannot be hired according to strictly value-rational criteria. Classified research, proprietary information, and patent rights considerations, moreover, restrict the freedom of communication upon which the extended scientific community depends. It might even be argued that "mission-oriented" research, by skewing scientific resources toward short term applications at the expense of basic research, restricts freedom of thought. None of these threats represents directly coercive action against the university by the state, because in every case the corporate university has entered into such relationships voluntarily. Once entered into, however, they represent real and coercive restrictions on academic life.

Few of these instances, however, have triggered university commitments to a moral or political stance. The reason is that in the postwar climate they have not aroused sufficiently widespread faculty and student concern. In the University of California system there has been continual protest against the university's connection to the Livermore weapons laboratory. Yet the protest has not been widespread. Indeed, even when a popular governor — Jerry Brown — sought to make Livermore an issue, he failed to crystallize sufficient public attention. By contrast, in 1984 the faculty at the California Institute of Technology held a series of mass meetings to protest the Caltech president's plans to sponsor an Air Force think tank. Faced with threats by the faculty to seek his dismissal and, no

doubt, sincerely surprised by the depth of faculty feeling, the president found a diplomatic way to withdraw his initial offer. The difficulties of the recent effort to petition scientists against "Star Wars" research provides another example of the contingency and importance of experienced indignation. So far, this massive influx of restricted research money for "Star Wars" has aroused relatively little opposition, and there have certainly been no signs of university commitment to an anti-"Star Wars" stance.

The South African divestment movement is responding to a much more subjective threat than any that I have discussed fo far. It is not, in the first instance, the real or actual danger to the society or the university that is the stimulus for action; rather, it is the danger to the university's moral reputation, which, of course, can ultimately have real consequences for both. For many years, the existence of South African apartheid did not seem related to the exercise of value-rationality in American universities in a substantial way. For many years, moreover, students and faculty were complacent about the issue. In the last two years, however, the small number of activists who have long campaigned for divestment have begun to exert a far-reaching moral effect. They have succeeded in creating a deep symbolic identification between American students and faculty and the disenfranchised racial groups in South Africa. Indeed, not to take university action against apartheid is now experienced by many faculty as a threat to the collegium's own intellectual life. The result, it is feared, would be the restriction of the moral authority of collegium faculty and of university students alike. In this situation, to maintain university autonomy would, in fact, reduce the integrity of value-rationality inside the American university itself. Apparently, some university commitment against apartheid must be made if the motive for value-rational behavior is to be maintained. The conflicts that have once again arisen between faculty and students, on the one hand, and governing boards, on the other, make evident the need for more rational and consistent procedures to formally express noncorporate university opinion.

In this essay I have tried to steer a middle course between the long- and the short-term considerations, between conviction and practicality, and between advocacy and explanation. For Weber, this middle ground was called "responsibility." Only by revising the liberal position on university autonomy can a truly responsible position be maintained.

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