Restoring the person: towards a new Christian Humanism

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Abstract

I argue that a major frontier challenge for the global community arises because of some adverse effects arising from the Darwinian cultural paradigm and from the general emphasis on the mathematical sciences. In the first section, I show how this occurs. In the second section, I argue that university education needs to rediscover its vocation of being a teacher of virtue. Hence, today's emphasis on the transfer of knowledge needs to be supplemented by the teaching of wisdom. I explore this proposal by considering two possible objections and by drawing out its practical consequences on an international level.

Résumé

I argue that a major frontier challenge for the global community arises because of the way current science is affecting culture. The effects I consider are those of the Darwinian cultural paradigm and those of the mathematical sciences. Darwinism, with its focus on genes or on large populations, tends to make culture neglect the individual person. And the hard sciences, with their emphasis on objectivity, tend to make people neglect the need for personal growth in virtue, about which these sciences have nothing much to say. In the first section of the paper, I show how these effects come about, and then propose that university education needs to rediscover its vocation of being a teacher of the entire person. Hence, today's emphasis on the transfer of knowledge needs to be supplemented by the teaching of wisdom. In the second section, I explore this proposal by considering two possible objections. A philosopher may object that, according to this proposal, seeking truth for truth's sake is not the highest kind of wisdom, as maintained since ancient times. A theologian may object that the proposal counters the Biblical injunction to care for one's neighbour. I show how these two objections are in fact harmless, and then conclude with a section on the proposal's practical consequences.

Global cultures are like the oceans. Deep down, they are connected. At the surface, they are moving and changing all the time—and so are horizons. What seems a frontier-issue on the horizon today may not be one tomorrow. We try to foretell the future and plan ahead, but there is no guarantee that we will avoid error. We may end up giving superficial problems great importance while the deeper ones remain untouched. These possible snares, however, should not make us lose heart. Risk is the spice of life. Let us venture, then, above the surging of the oceans so as to get an idea of what the future might have in store. I will look mainly at the interaction, within culture, between theology, philosophy and science. In the first section, I will determine one specific challenge in this area; in the second section, I deal with some objections, and then, in the last section, I will suggest how best to respond to the challenge.

1. Science and culture: a new proposal

The relation between science, theology and culture has been the focus of discussion for hundreds of years. Nowadays, when considering frontier questions in this area, we often think immediately of the numerous recent scientific discoveries that oblige theologians to update their work. Moral theologians are incessantly concerned about human reproductive science and technology. Theologians of creation are being awakened from their slumbers by the alarming statistics on global ecological instability. Theological anthropologists are struggling to save the soul from the onslaught of the neuroscientists. Specialists of the doctrines of the Incarnation and of Original Sin are again at work because of developments in evolutionary anthropology. All these frontier-issues, although somewhat diverse, are essentially of one type. They are all theoretical. They concern the need to rework theological explanations. No doubt, such frontier-issues are very important. They deserve ongoing attention. Efforts to address them constitute, in fact, the crucial task of rebuilding intellectual bridges between the various parts of our conceptual scheme. They counteract the perennial danger of having humanity slide into intellectual, irreversible fragmentation.[1]

In spite of their importance, however, theoretical frontier-issues do not represent the only kind there is. Over and above these theoretical issues, there are other frontier-issues that can be called practical. These are often neglected because they do not deal with what scientists or theologians say. They deal rather with what scientists and theologians do. As recent work in the history of the natural sciences shows, it is a mistake to consider theories timeless entities totally detached from the philosophical, theological and cultural endeavours that discovered them. An entire cultural paradigm affects, and is affected by, the discovery and formulation of any given major theory. Moreover, cultural paradigms affect individuals not only in their thinking but also in their doing. And this fact is what gives rise to frontier-issues that are practical. Two such issues are especially important.

The person

A new influential paradigm emerged in seventeenth century Europe. It has come to be called the mechanistic worldview. Put simply, this view held that all objects are made up of particles and all effects are the result of push-pull, law-governed forces between these particles. Inaugurated by René Descartes and quantified by Isaac Newton and P-S de Laplace, this outlook had a deep impact on how people understood the world and their place in it. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw many Christian philosophers and theologians respond to this paradigm. Much work was dedicated to the frontier-issues it provoked. There were important debates on the nature of the human soul, the clash between determinism and freedom, and so on. Since then, science has moved on a great deal, and today's physics practically disproves the mechanistic worldview. This point, however, does not mean that nowadays there is no scientific paradigm to reckon with.

Consider, for instance, Charles Darwin's impact. He discovered that, when organisms have traits that are hereditary, vital for survival and capable of mutating randomly, those organisms, as a species, will evolve by natural selection. Since the publication of his theory,

the form of explanation he used has been extended in various directions beyond the strictly biological realm. Just as Isaac Newton had given rise to a cultural paradigm, known as Newtonianism, so also Darwin has given rise to Darwinism. Many things can be said about this new paradigm, about how it affects psychology, economics, ethics and other areas, but I want to focus on one issue only. I want to illustrate how this paradigm tends to shift global attention away from what happens to the individual person. It does this by drawing attention to aspects that are, with respect to human beings, either microscopic or macroscopic. Because of this worldview, people become engrossed in what happens to the gene or engrossed in what happens to large groups, of which the individual is just a tiny part. Let us consider these two trends in some more detail.

Gregor Mendel's pioneering work on the unit of biological heredity, the gene, was of central importance for the merging of evolutionary theory with molecular biology. Because of this successful merging, some popular-science writers have gone so far as to say that only genes count. They describe genes as having feelings, wants and desires like humans. They have claimed that genes are selfish, with elaborate plans on how best to survive. On this view, human individuals become mere vehicles for genes. Genes use humans to survive; and that is all there is to life. This view, although apparently fantastic, can affect deep cultural trends because it is often presented as based on solid science. Genes become more important than people: your worth is the worth of the genes you carry. For centuries, the dignity of the human individual has been the basic concept for understanding justice within social, legal and cultural interaction. Now, all this has to change. In the words of Immanuel Kant, the human individual should never be considered a means to an end. But now science seems to establish, as a matter of brute fact, that the individual is indeed a means—a means for genes to propagate. Since this is scientific truth, so the story goes, we just have to accept it. So the

upshot is unavoidable. The evolutionary paradigm makes humans lose their importance and their dignity. They lose their faces.

Surprisingly, this paradigm has also the opposite effect. It undermines the importance of the individual by pulling towards macroscopic considerations. As explained above, the scientific theory of evolution involves the study of changes in traits of organisms through long stretches of time. Its focus is on what happens to large groups in the long run; the values that count are average values. Because of the very nature of the theory, therefore, the main focus of attention starts hovering way above the individual. The theory makes us lose interest in what happens to the individual; and this affects culture in general. A new voice tells us, 'Attend to the individual's progress and way of life, and you are losing your time; for all you know, that individual's struggles and achievements will be swallowed up by opposite trends within the group. What you should consider is what is happening to vast numbers taken together. Hence, forget individual care; embark on population studies.'

What has been said so far should not, of course, diminish our genuine appreciation of the scientific theory of evolution as such. The evidential support this theory enjoys within its domain is as robust as the support of any other accepted theory. Moreover, its heuristic potential and explanatory power are very impressive. Nevertheless, one needs to stress that the cultural paradigm it has generated so far tends to obscure the dignity and importance of the individual person. This cultural trend needs to be addressed and corrected before it is too late—before the human person vanishes completely behind gene talk or statistical tables.

The art of living

A second frontier issue arises also not from current science itself but from what current science generates at the cultural level. Recall first how the various scientific disciplines constitute not a democracy but a hierarchy, the top places being occupied by the mathematical sciences, the so-called hard sciences. This hierarchy, which is allegedly the

only guardian of objectivity and truth, has a significant effect on culture. For instance, the fascination with the mathematical sciences drives ethics towards utilitarianism. It drives philosophy of mind towards naturalism or scientism. It tends to divide intellectual activity into two clear camps, hard and soft. Science is hard; literature is soft. Reason is hard; emotion is soft. Empirical is hard; idealistic is soft. Analysis is hard; synthesis is soft. Self-sufficiency is hard; dialogue is soft. Facts are hard; interpretation is soft. Logical is hard; metaphorical is soft. Mechanical is hard; organic is soft. Objective is hard; personal is soft. The combination of all these trends affects the kind of education students receive at university level. Knowledge-transfer is given priority. University education fills students' minds with descriptions of chemicals and processes, with quantities and equations, with dates and definitions. What is highlighted is objective knowledge. What is neglected is personal life. In academia, questions about what a good life is and how to achieve it, and questions about how to do good and avoid evil, have been exiled.

Universities have essentially embraced knowledge and rejected wisdom. Knowledge is the result of a group effort. It accumulates within society bit by bit. Wisdom, on the contrary, is a personal affair. It is a feature of the individual. There is no stack of wisdom. There is no library of wisdom corresponding to our libraries of knowledge. Each person needs to attain wisdom as an individual achievement, perhaps helped by direct example from others. Knowledge is learnt piecemeal, often in the form of distinct propositions. Wisdom is a unifying feature of the person, bringing together the various elements of one's knowledge and the various experiences of one's life. Unlike knowledge, wisdom is a habit of life that unites a reflective attitude with practical concerns. With it, individuals have the skill to evaluate complex situations of life and to attain a good life, given their personal possibilities. Knowledge is often associated with quantity. Wisdom is often associated with quality of life.

The consequences of embracing knowledge and rejecting wisdom can be serious. While globalization favours economic development and context-independent knowledge-transfer, the art of living a good life is being systematically marginalized. And this creates a frontier-issue related to education, a frontier-issue that is, just like the one mentioned before, not theoretical but practical. The two issues, in fact, are related. The vanishing of the human individual, through exclusive interest in either the microscopic or the macroscopic level, goes hand in hand with the neglect of the individual's efforts to realize a good life—at the personal level. The fact that the two frontier-issues are closely related suggests that there could be a common solution; which is simply to somehow reintroduce within university education the teaching of virtue, by which students can learn how to achieve a good life.

2. Objections

Before spelling out this response in some more detail, it is important to foresee at least two possible objections; one is mainly philosophical, the other theological.

Let us start with the idea of acquiring knowledge for its own sake. According to a venerable tradition in Western philosophy, wisdom is the seeking of truth for its own sake (called by Aristotle, first philosophy, *he prote philosophia*). This is distinct from another kind of wisdom that is known as practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Seeking truth for the sake of some project gives priority to the project rather than to the truth being sought. Hence, this kind of seeking truth cannot be the highest. Only if our attention is absorbed completely by the truth, can we be on the path of the highest wisdom, and this happens when truth itself is the end of our search. Moreover, through the centuries after Aristotle, seeking truth for its own sake has become associated with theoretical science. Why, then, should we make universities diminish their teaching of objective theory? Real wisdom lies in the transcending of personal interests and problems. It does not lie in being preoccupied with oneself.

This objection looks compelling. On further analysis, however, it turns out to be quite harmless. We need to recall that to live a good life is not the same things as engaging in some mundane project. People concerned with living a good life are engaged in the project—quite literally—of bringing to life what theory delivers. They are engaged in the incarnation of contemplation. Recall Plato's myth of the cave. In this story, there is an interesting detail that is often neglected. A prisoner in a dark, underground cavern is liberated, climbs out of the cave and discovers the true light. He does not, however, remain out there, relishing the goodness of truth. Plato continues his story by telling us that the enlightened prisoner makes his way back into the cave and tries to tell his fellow prisoners about his discovery.[2] The contemplation of the truth, therefore, is incomplete if it does not return and affect the original state we were in before starting. Plato revisits this idea when discussing the nature of the soul. For him, it is evident that wisdom lies in the harmony that the highest part of the soul establishes between all the other parts of the soul, and eventually with all the bodily faculties and tendencies. Wisdom lies essentially in establishing the right kind of order or harmony. Even Aristotle, in fact, acknowledges that the wise should not lack the skill of living well.[3] My proposed response is, in fact, an invitation to return to Plato, at least on this point, and to give the striving for harmony within the self its due importance. As one Stoic philosopher wrote: 'just as wood is the material of the carpenter, bronze that of the statue maker, so each individual's own life is the material of the art of living.'[4]

A second objection might come from theology. My proposal consists in focusing on the individual, rather than on, for instance, large numbers of individuals. This point goes against some basic ideas expressed in the Bible. Consider the attitudes that self-care can generate, attitudes like spiritual egoism, which is seeking one's own salvation, one's own excellence, rather than the salvation of others. It can generate a spirituality of detachment from the world understood mainly as disinterestedness, somewhat like the attitude we see

represented by the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan. It can make people turn their faces away from the kenosis of Christ, downplaying the neighbour's plight and the self-giving nature of God revealed in Christ, becoming instead engrossed in pathetic, spiritual navel-gazing. Such consequences are certainly very serious, especially from a Christian point of view. The idea, therefore, of promoting the skill of living cannot be totally right.

This objection has indeed some truth in it. Does it, however, really undermine the proposal? To see why it does not, start with Our Lord's injunction in Matthew's Gospel: 'first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.'[5] This directive is undoubtedly about the care of the self. One can therefore detect some tension between this point and the parable of the Good Samaritan. On the one hand, Jesus is telling us to polish up our own interior life, to be genuine, and to consider this task our first priority. On the other hand, Jesus is also telling us that a false sense of self-concern is deadly, in the spiritual sense, especially when it makes us act like the priest or the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan. How can this tension be resolved? I think that for the solution we need to look at Jesus himself. His life teaches us how to be authentic, even perfect as the Father is perfect, and yet not enclosed us within ourselves. Concern with one's self need not be egocentric. When genuine, this concern should flow out, of its very nature, into concrete action in line with the common good. If I care about whether I am a good person or not, I can offer help to my neighbours where and when they really need it. I will even be able to help them in a deeper, more enduring way—help them become good persons. If, on the contrary, I do not care about whether I am a good person or not, I would be blind. I would not even see what my neighbours need. Hence, the individual takes priority. The individual's virtuous life is the source, not the product, of the community's wellbeing. This is essentially a New Testament idea. In the mystery of Christ, God has revealed His

concern with the welfare of the individual. Christ's salvific act is God's personal way of involving himself with humanity. He tore the heavens open and came down. In that act, God highlights his shift in concern. In the Old Testament, the main focus was on the salvation of the chosen people as a whole. In the New Testament, the main focus is on Jesus, and on those who personally, individually, express their faith in him. This is what theologians refer to when they speak of the scandal of particularity, which sets Christianity apart.[6] And this point adds considerable support to the proposal put forward in this paper.

3. Practical consequences

This proposal is mainly concerned with students doing their first degree at university. Fortunately, this sector of society is growing. More and more young people have the opportunity of studying for a degree at university; and first degrees, let us recall, are not primarily the first step towards a career in research. They are, or should be, in large part a preparation for life. When we say that university education should help students grow in wisdom rather than be satisfied with the mere transfer of knowledge, we are in fact calling for a new attitude. We are urging an updated form of Christian Humanism, which addresses a number of issues simultaneously, issues that are often seen as separate.[7] First, the proposal is relevant as regards the information explosion. Within these last decades, the amount of accessible information to any individual has increased enormously. But the skill to choose between more valuable and less valuable information has not increased at the same rate.[8] The proposal defended in this paper should be a step in the right direction. Secondly, sociologists of religion are telling us of a rising interest in spirituality across the globe—spirituality in a very broad sense, including, for instance, white magic, psychic powers, universal energy, Ignatian discernment, mystical union with God, and other things.[9] The proposal defended in this paper is one way of helping young people bring order, a reasoned order, into this uncharted cultural landscape. Thirdly, the care for creation: the individual's skill to bring

order into his or her life includes growth in the right relation towards the environment.[10] Order within the life of the individual overflows and becomes order within the life of the community, and, further still, life in the global village.[11]

On a more practical level, immediate action seems to be needed in three main areas. First of all, a point about science itself: we need, of course, to desist from demonizing science. We need, rather, to retrieve the fullness of the scientific experience; give credit where credit is due; encourage scientists and show them the dignity of their vocation; bring into the laboratory the historical and ethical dimension; recall how science is itself the vehicle of a specific kind of virtue, which may be called heuristic courage. Secondly, the international community needs to rediscover the idea of trans-cultural virtues, those that closely associated with basic, human, biological needs. For this important task, different traditions, different viewpoints, should be consulted; the more viewpoints there are, the better the result. Thirdly, we need to rediscover the importance of educating the students' affective dimension. Unfortunately, what normally happens is that emotional development is never considered part of the aim of university education. So something on this front needs to be introduced. Firsthand experience of different ways of human living, for instance experiencing the life of the poor, can benefit students enormously by provoking an emotional response, which can later be discussed and evaluated.[12] But the study of literature within an overly technical curriculum may also have an important role to play. It offers a virtual world in which students can be guided to understand their emotional response to various possible human situations.

The foregoing arguments point towards the following project: to explore the possibility of establishing an international network with the aim of seeking the characteristics of wisdom from the viewpoint of various cultures. These studies can deal with two tasks. First, they can try to determine a list of trans-cultural virtues, this being done with due

sensitivity towards the culture where the inquiry is situated. The virtues being sought here are those associated closely with the basic, biological features of human beings, such as parental care, growing up, dealing with authority, facing the prospect of death, and so on. Secondly, the inquiry can determine a list of efficient strategies for the teaching of wisdom as discussed in this paper. The hope is that the international pooling of resources on these issues will show convergence, and that the results will be beneficial for the globalized world of the 21st century. This project is in line with the basic inspiration behind the 1599 *Ratio Studiorum*, which was aimed essentially at secondary education. This time we aim at tertiary education. If the project works, it can be the beginning of a practical handbook on character-formation for university lecturers in Jesuit institutions worldwide.

Questions for further discussion

1) Is the university the right place for growth in wisdom?
2) Since we teach wisdom mainly by example, just lecturing about wisdom, or about virtues, or about character-formation, cannot be effective. Do you agree?
3) Can tension be reduced and harmony restored between knowledge-transfer and growth in wisdom?
4) If a new form of Christian Humanism respects other religious viewpoints, will it be able to avoid sliding into a non-religious Humanism?

References

[1] Cf. Pedro Arrupe, 'Theological reflection and interdisciplinary research' in: Pedro Arrupe, S.J., *Jesuit Apostolates Today*, J. Aixala S.J. (ed.) (Institute of Jesuit Sources: St. Louis USA, 1981), pp. 33–42 (especially p. 37).

[2] *Republic* VII, 516e–517a.

[3] *Nicomachean Ethics* VI, 1140a–1141a.

[4] Epictetus, *Dissertationes* 1.15.2

[5] Mt 7:5 (NIV).

[6] E.g. Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* IV, 1; *Dominus Iesus*, §15.

[7] Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, §78.

[8] *General Congregation* 35, §20.

[9] *General Congregation* 34, §21.

[10] John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, §37.

[11] *Complementary Norms to the Constitutions*, §289, no. 1.

[12] *General Congregation* 34, §411.