

# What are Universities For?

Nigel Biggar

Andrei Zhdanov, Stalin's cultural enforcer, opened his address to the 1948 Moscow Congress of Composers thus:

*"Comrade Musicians, permit me a few opening remarks on the role of the creative artist in society. In the West, the artist is a mere ornament, victim to market forces. He can be made, or broken, by the vogues of a narrow intellectual elite. Whether he lives or starves depends on how fashionable he is. Freedom is a struggle to survive. We — we value our artist. We recognise the gift he brings. As any science — any technology — poetry, art are vital to our humanity. Our institutions, therefore, accord the artist proper status. In our society, he enjoys his rightful place. But with that status comes responsibility. In the West, yes, the artist is free to dabble in abstractions, in sentimental nihilism, in meaninglessness itself. We, the People, demand that you touch us, that you reach into us, that your creations be of meaning to us. In a word, that you speak. Have we, in our Soviet music, the beginnings of a failure to speak?"*

And down in the audience, about to be denounced for the "hooligan squawkings" of his Ninth Symphony, Dmitri Shostakovich leans over to his neighbour and mutters: "The trouble with Zhdanov is that he's so often right."

Well, half-right: right, that the artist has a public responsibility; wrong, that the responsible artist is always harmonious and upbeat.

Like Zhdanov, today's Western governments are also half-right. They are right that universities have a public responsibility but wrong that this responsibility amounts to little more than economic responsiveness. Actually, in his less shrunken, fuller conception of public responsibility — if only in that — Comrade Zhdanov was somewhat wiser than our own rulers.

The first time that I spoke on what universities were for was just over five years ago, when I was teaching at Trinity College Dublin. I had been asked to preach in the College Chapel at a service to mark the beginning of the 2004 academic year. A few months earlier, the university had buckled under pressure from government, and had embarked on a wholesale reorganisation towards an allegedly business model of corporate structure. It had done this in the vain hope of appeasing its political masters into reversing the 18 per cent cut in core funding that had suddenly been imposed. (And this

was while the Celtic Tiger was still purring along very happily — or so it seemed at the time.)

Shortly afterwards, the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) had published a report on higher education in Ireland. Given the nature of the OECD, and given that it compiled its report at the request of the Irish government, its recommendations failed to surprise: universities should serve a national economic strategy; they should work harder at the commercial exploitation of scientific and technological research; and they should train students in the intellectual and social skills necessary to meet the needs and opportunities of the labour market.

In this context, I devoted my October sermon to reflecting on the purpose of universities. And when I came to deliver it, I might have been expected — as a member of the faculty of arts and humanities, as an ethicist and as a clergyman — to wax lyrical in

Figure 1: No Ivory Tower: Oxford, as seen in a pre-war Great Western Railway poster, has always played a public role (Getty Images)



complaint against government materialism and philistinism.

But I resolved not to live down to my stereotype. I decided to distance myself from any whiff of ivory-tower snobbery. After all, Ireland had only very recently emerged out of decades of relative and humiliating poverty, and the Irish knew better than many Westerners that, whether or not poverty is good for the soul, it is really not a lot of fun. Without the wealth that economic success brings, lots of good and worthwhile

things simply can't get done.

So, no, I didn't think then — and I don't think now — that it's inappropriate that government should ask universities to serve economic goals and to prepare their students for the labour market: that is, for the non-academic work that the vast majority of them will spend most of the rest of their lives doing. I do think that economic responsiveness belongs to universities' public responsibility.

We shouldn't idealise or overmoralise universities. Right from their medieval beginnings, they have served private purposes and practical public purposes as well as the sheer *amor scientiae*. For example, the founding of the University of Bologna, which lays dubious claim to be the longest continually operating in the world, was led by market-demand. It began with ambitious students appointing professors and monitoring their performance by threatening fines, against which the hapless professors

had to put down a deposit. The notion that university education should be consumer-led is not a new one.

Moreover, prominent among the original, classic university disciplines was, of course, law, in which both private individuals and public institutions had strong interests. Then, as now, individuals wanted to build careers: as Peter of Blois, the 12th-century poet, former law student and future royal courtier, put it: "There are two things that drive men hard to the study of jurisprudence; these are the pursuit of offices and the vain passion for fame." Well, no doubt personal ambition can be distorted by a lust for status and for the limelight. But there's nothing wrong as such with individuals wanting to find a social role in which to exercise their talents — and that natural, grassroots desire was undoubtedly one of the inspirations behind the founding of the earliest universities.

But then, as now, there was also top-down inspiration. Popes and bishops needed educated pastors and they and kings needed educated administrators and lawyers capable of developing and embedding nationwide systems. It's a bit of a puzzle as to why a provincial market-town such as Oxford ever came to grow a university in the 12th century. But one answer is that by the 1180s Oxford had become a seat of the royal administration and of the ecclesiastical courts. Universities have played a public role from the beginning, and they have continued to do so. Since the 19th century, university professors in many European countries have been part of the civil service. And after 1848, students in Tsarist universities were kitted out in quasi-military uniform.

So universities were never simply the child of an ivory-tower love of knowledge for knowledge's sake. They were always partly fuelled by practical concerns, whether the concerns of private individuals or of those with public responsibility. But practical concerns are not small and grubby or intellectually untaxing. Law is a very important social institution, which, theologians claim, mirrors the constitution of the cosmos and on its practice depend important human benefits such as social peace, the support of public and private virtue, and justice. The practice of medicine, of course, serves the good of physical health. And the practice of theology serves the good of spiritual and moral health. So there we have three of the four faculties of a typical medieval university — theology, law and medicine — each of them ordered to educate students in the principles of a practice designed to serve human well-being. (If you're wondering about the fourth faculty, arts, its concern was with developing the verbal, logical, mathematical — and later, general philosophical — understanding basic to studies in the other, higher faculties.)

So our earliest universities were considerably fuelled by practical concerns for certain human and public goods. With the sole exception of medicine, however,

they tended to fight shy of technical, or what they called "mechanical", concerns. So no medieval university sported a faculty of architecture or agriculture. Why? I assume that this reflects the infection of medieval Christendom by an Aristotelian disdain for the servile arts — the merely technical skills that slaves, rather than citizens, had to exercise. I say "infection" because Christianity's earthy Jewish matrix and its own socially humble origins should have immunised it against such class snobbery. Contrast Aristotle with this passage from the Wisdom literature of the Christian Scriptures: "[The workman and craftsman, the blacksmith and potter:] all these put their trust in their hands and each is skilled at his own craft. A town could not be built without them, there would be no settling, no travelling. But they are not required at the council, they do not hold high rank in the assembly. They do not sit on the judicial bench, and have no grasp of law. They are not remarkable for culture or sound judgment, and are not found among the inventors of maxims. But they maintain the fabric of the world..." [Ecclesiasticus 38.35-39a]. Except in the case of doctors, the medieval university seems to have forgotten this piece of biblical wisdom. And it was only in the post-Reformation, Lutheranised, modern period that the technical sciences began to find a proper home in higher education. So in the mid-19th century, the industrialised cities of northern England began to sprout university colleges with close links to local industries. For example, the University of Leeds was heavily oriented to the research and training needs of the textile industry until it was decimated in the 1980s. Even a university with an impeccable medieval pedigree such as Glasgow was pleased in 1889 to accept the endowment of a chair of shipbuilding (or "naval architecture", to give it its title).

Universities have never been simply ivory towers. They've never simply sought knowledge for knowledge's sake. And they have no need to apologise for that. Indeed, I myself harbour doubts about the academic's typical defensive gambit of asserting the intrinsic value of knowledge. It's not that I doubt the intrinsic good of knowledge of the truth. After all, the notion of human beings losing sleep, missing meals, even risking their lives in pursuit of the truth, or in defence of it, is a perfectly familiar one. But some truths are surely rather less valuable than others. There is a truth about the number of times that the surname Biggar appears in the Birmingham telephone directory and not even I can muster a whole lot of interest in that. It is a truth, of course, but it hardly matters. I'm with Comrade Zhdanov on this: as from the artist, so from the academic, an account is needed of why what he does matters — and why it matters, why it speaks, beyond the realm of his own private fancy.

Such an account is not difficult for natural scientists to render, given the close relationship between the natural sciences on the one hand, and the good of

physical health and the means of life-saving, -securing or -enhancing technology. Nor is it very difficult for social and human scientists, given the direct bearing of their disciplines on the psychological health of individuals and the social health of societies.

Explaining why the arts and humanities matter, however, is more difficult. Among the doctoral dissertations in the Humanities being examined in Oxford in 2009 was one on the function and status of landscape painting in late 16th- and 17th-century Rome, another on the Mamluk historiography of the Fatimids, and another entitled *Flirting with fame: Byron and his female readers*. Now no doubt these topics fascinate those whose hobby it is to study them, but why exactly should they matter to anyone else? And why should public money be spent on them — as opposed to, say, being spent on more helicopters for our hard-pressed troops in Afghanistan? If there is a robust answer, it doesn't lie immediately to hand — as witness the Arts and Humanities Research Council's strangled attempts to articulate it in the face of the shamelessly utilitarian "impact agenda" of the late Brown government.

This dismaying inarticulacy is one reason why, six years ago, the then Secretary of State for Education, Charles Clarke, himself a graduate in maths and economics, felt no embarrassment in opining that public funding should only support academic subjects of "clear usefulness". He was quoted in the *Guardian* as saying: "I don't mind there being some medievalists around for ornamental purposes, but there is no reason for the state to pay for them." (He denied saying this.) It is also the reason why in June 2009 Lord Mandelson's delivery of university affairs entirely into the hands of a new Department of Business, Innovation, and Skills provoked no public outcry. And it explains why — notwithstanding the fact that David Willetts, the new Minister of State for Universities and Science, has publicly denounced the "bleak" utilitarian view of higher education and asserted its social, civic importance — the new coalition's Programme for Government mentions universities only ever in connection with "building a strong and innovative economy" and fostering stronger links with industry.

To ask a scholar of history, literature or theology to explain what he does matters is one thing. To ask that he demonstrate its usefulness is quite another. "Usefulness" connotes a shrunken, materialistic, utilitarian understanding of human goods — an understanding that is sunk deep into Anglo-Saxon mentality. In contemporary colloquial English, when we talk about "goods" we're referring to washing machines, sofas, cars and plasma TVs. Until the modern era, however, the word "goods" encompassed the likes of beauty, justice, friendship and communion with God — meanings that now survive among us only in university departments of

moral theology and (to the extent that they follow Aristotle rather than Bentham or J. S. Mill) moral philosophy. Compared to this rich, colourful and dignifying vision of human flourishing, our modern utilitarian view is pinched, anaemic and degrading. This secularised Protestant view is embedded in the fate of other words in the English language. Take, for example, *otium*, the Latin noun that the medievals used to refer positively to the freedom to reflect and admire: this has come down to us as the disdainful adjective "otiose" — meaning "unemployed," "idle", "sterile". And the medieval word for the basic university course in the liberal rational and public arts of thinking, writing and persuading — *trivium* — has reached us as "trivial". (I very much wanted to be able to convert this etymological point into a hat-trick by sharing my discovery that the word for the other half of the medieval liberal arts course — *quadrivium* — had given us "drivel". Disappointingly, the Oxford English Dictionary yielded up no oxygen for that wild speculation.)

In modern, hard-nosed, utilitarian Anglo-Saxon cultures, it is quite difficult to get a hearing for the serious worth of anything that can't be measured. This is not quite as true in other Western countries. In Ireland, at least since the late 19th century, national identity defined itself over and against the ruthless, materialistic utilitarianism of the globalising British empire. (And if you've read the fine, haunting novel about Henry James, *The Master*, which was published a few years ago by one of contemporary Ireland's foremost writers, Colm Tóibín, you'll notice that he attributes very similar views of Edwardian Britain to the post-Puritan New Englander William James.) One of the extraordinary, concrete public expressions of this Irish resistance to Anglo-Saxon materialism is that to this day in Ireland, if you can get yourself registered as an "artist", then you pay no income tax. (Which might go some way towards explaining why every second person I met when I was teaching at Trinity College Dublin seemed to be writing and publishing poetry.) Ireland, then, furnishes some hope that, even in this day and age, a national society can publicly recognise human and social goods that are beyond measurement.

So while it is difficult in a heavily utilitarian culture such as ours to make a case for academic activity that doesn't matter much economically, it nevertheless belongs to the moral vocation of university "professors" (in the broad sense of any professional academic) in the arts and humanities to do just that.

It's their currently prophetic role to remember and to articulate what, beyond serving the economy, is the good of studying histories and literatures, religions and cultures, theologies and philosophies, music and drama. Why are these not just trivial, otiose ornaments? Why are they not self-indulgent recreations sponging off the

public purse? Why do they matter for human and public flourishing?

There are the questions. So what are the answers? Let me inaugurate two of lines of thought. First, one valuable gift that the arts and humanities make is to introduce us to foreign worlds: worlds made strange by the passage of time; present worlds structured by the peculiar grip of unfamiliar languages; worlds alien to us in their social organisation and manners, their religious and philosophical convictions.

Introduction to these foreign worlds confers a substantial benefit: the benefit of distance from our own world, and thereby the freedom to ask questions of it that we could never otherwise have conceived. In foreign worlds, past and present, they see and love and do things differently. And in reflecting upon that difference, it might occur to us from time to time that they see and love and do things better. So, one precious contribution of the arts and humanities is their furnishing public discourse with the critical resources of an understanding of foreign worlds, resources vital for social and cultural and moral renewal — a renewal that deserves at least an equal place alongside scientific and technological innovation.

That's my first thought.

My second thought is this. The arts and humanities not only introduce us to foreign worlds, they teach us to treat them well. They teach us to read strange and intractable texts with patience and care; to meet alien ideas and practices with humility, docility, and charity; to draw alongside foreign worlds before we set about — as we must — judging them. They train us in the practice of honest dialogue, which respects the "Other" as a potential prophet, one who might yet speak a new word about what's true and good and beautiful.

A commitment to the truth, humility, a readiness to be taught, patience, carefulness, charity: all of these moral virtues that inform the intellectual discipline into which the arts and humanities induct their students; all of these moral virtues of which public discourse, whether in the media or in Parliament or in Congress, displays no obvious surplus. All of these moral virtues, without which this country and others may get to become a "knowledge economy", but won't get to become a "wisdom society".

And public decisions that, being unwise, are careless with the truth, arrogant, unteachable, impatient and uncharitable, will be bad decisions — and bad decisions cause needless damage to real institutions and real individuals.

What I'm saying, then, is that in addition to providing talented individuals with the opportunity to grow their gifts and find a social role to exercise them; in addition to producing qualified applicants for positions in legal practice and in public administration; in addition to training the labour-force to man a high-tech, service-oriented economy; and in addition to generating new

scientific knowledge with technological or commercial applications, universities exist to form individuals and citizens in certain virtues — virtues that are not just intellectual, but are also social and political.

Historically, Oxbridge — with its medieval heritage of small college communities and their chapels, and with its tutorial system — has recognised that education is properly not just about the communication of information or ideas by lecture, nor just about technical apprenticeship, but about the morally formative influence of tutor on student.

It has recognised that this relationship does have a certain pastoral quality to it, that this need not be paternalistic, and that it can develop into equal friendship — as in my experience it not infrequently does. This was certainly the ideal and the practice of John Henry Newman, of whom it was reported by Ian Ker in *John Henry Newman: A Biography* (Oxford University Press, 1988) that when he was a Tutorial Fellow at Oriel College in the late 1820s, "He cultivated relations [with students], not only of intimacy, but of friendship, and almost of equality." And when he came to found his Catholic University in Dublin, Newman was adamant that its tutors would represent "that union of intellectual and moral influence, the separation of which is the evil of the age".

Well, that separation is even more the evil of the age now. In our present *Zeitgeist*, dominated as it is by a libertarian, atomistic kind of liberalism, the idea that any individual has responsibility for the moral formation of any other — and especially an adult for a late adolescent who is not her own child — is not only implausible but positively suspect. Indeed, if I were to make the suggestion to my academic colleagues that they have a responsibility for the moral formation of their students, I'd wager that most of them would meet it with a snort of indignation against such insufferable, Victorian paternalism. And yet, if it is true that university education — especially in the arts and humanities — is not about the growth of certain intellectual and social virtues, then it does become very hard to see why the study of landscape painting or medieval North African history or Byron's reception among women is anything but a private and rather frivolous indulgence.

Comrade Zhdanov was right. If they don't have a moral vocation, then the arts and humanities are doomed to degrade themselves, if not by serving the private whims of cosseted intellectuals, then by trying to justify public investment in terms of their contribution to the tourist and entertainment industries. I hope that such a dismal prospect repels us. But if it does repel us, then it should also move us to turn round and face a sharp question about ourselves and about the culture that we allow to prevail among us: how have we become the kind of people who, presented with the claim that university teachers bear responsibility for the moral formation of

their students, would typically snap back: "So who made me my brother's moral keeper?"

---



**Nigel Biggar is the Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at Oxford University**

*This is a revised version of an address delivered to Rhodes Scholars at a Trinity Forum conference at Rhodes House, Oxford, on November 7, 2009.*

*Link accessed 7/7/2018: <http://www.standpointmag.co.uk/node/3156/full>*