

# After the University, Long Live the Academy!

[October 26, 2017](#) by [chad wellmon](#)

In 1917 a group of German university students invited the renowned sociologist Max Weber to Munich to participate in a lecture series entitled “intellectual work as vocation” [*geistige Arbeit als Beruf*]. The students met weekly in the backroom of a bookstore as the Bavarian chapter of the National Federation of Independent Student Groups, a loose association of students established around 1900 to make sense of the radical changes German universities had undergone in a matter of decades.

Between 1880 and 1910, German university enrollments doubled, state expenditures quadrupled—with most going to new research institutes and labs for the natural sciences—both teaching and research became more specialized, and universities increasingly relied on contingent labor (the emergence of the *Privatdozent*).

By 1900, the university’s defenders and detractors alike referred to alma mater as a *Großbetrieb*—an industrial concern that produced knowledge through an increasingly differentiated division of intellectual labor. The “Haus der Wissenschaft,” as the idealist reformers who had invented the modern research university a century earlier, had become a modern industrial bureaucracy. The ideal of the university as an intimate, intellectual community devoted to the scholarly life seemed to have faded.

The students who had invited Weber to Munich wanted him to explain an institution they no longer recognized, an institution that, as one critic put it, had transformed the very idea of an “intellectual vocation” into a “corrupting monstrosity.” “Is it possible,” wrote the group’s president, “to devote oneself completely to the unending task of intellectual work [*geistige Arbeit*] and still remain in this world? Is intellectual work still possible as a vocation?” In a modern world characterized by the division of labor, constant economic expansion, accelerating technological change, and the reduction of all goods to economic and political utility, could universities sustain a morally robust and socially distinct way of life?

By accepting the invitation to Munich, Weber agreed to weigh in on a decades-long German debate about the fate of moral education in the research university and the broader cultural anxiety that *Wissenschaft* [specialized knowledge] had eclipsed *Bildung* [moral formation]. [**Aside on *Wissenschaft***] Since the 1870’s, German faculty members and intellectuals worried that universities encouraged overly-specialized or, to use the term of the day, “micrological,” research; that they overwhelmed students with too much information; and that they provided students with no coherent account of knowledge and, more fundamentally, their lives. Research universities produced human capital for a modern state; it did not form persons for good lives.

The students who gathered to hear Weber lecture on the fate of “intellectual work as vocation” on November 7, 1917—almost exactly 100 years ago—heard a version of what we know today as his famous essay “Science as Vocation.” And so they heard Weber claim that specialized scholarship [*Wissenschaft*] had nothing to say about the “ultimate” questions that drove their lives, that specialized scholarship had nothing final to offer them on matters of value, that modern knowledge was, in this respect, “meaningless.”

Under these internal presuppositions, what is the meaning of science as a vocation, now after all these former illusions, the ‘way to true being,’ the ‘way to true art,’ the ‘way to true nature,’ the ‘way to true

God,' the 'way to true happiness,' have been dispelled? Tolstoi has given the simplest answer, with the words: 'Science is meaningless because it gives no answer to our question, the only question important for us: "What shall we do and how shall we live?"'

Soon after his speech, critics lambasted Weber's account of scholarship or science as sign of "resignation," as "the shrunken remains of the great old wisdom." Others simply lamented what they considered the austere truth of Weber's account: that modern knowledge yielded "less and less and rep[aid] the effort expended with ever more meager results." Modern, scientific knowledge was "exhausted."

Ever since Weber's speech, critics and defenders alike have continued to associate "Science as Vocation" with the moral agnosticism of value-free science, the hopelessness of a bureaucratic, hyper-rationalized modernity, and mere technical knowledge.

And yet some of the students who were there in Munich in 1917 described Weber's lecture as a charismatic defense of modern scholarship and the research university. Weber's effect on all of us that day, wrote the philosopher Karl Löwith, "was staggering." Everything Weber said was "summoned directly from deep within and thought through with a critical intellect and violently so. His words were haunted by a human gravity that lent him personality. His refusal to offer easy answers was matched only by the acuity of his questions." His words "redeemed" us. Modern knowledge, it seemed, could still transform.

In recalling his experience in Munich, Löwith described not just Max Weber the famed sociologist of Western modernity, but the ideal modern, if very German, scholar: biting, critical, and disciplined but also humane, imaginative, and impassioned. Weber embodied, that is, the singular virtue of an institution presumed to have none: what Weber called "intellectual rectitude" [intellektuelle Rechtschaffenheit].

The purpose of the university, Weber argued, was to cultivate in students this "one virtue: intellectual rectitude." And like generations of German scholars before him, Weber associated this scholarly virtue with *Wissenschaft*. One of the first defenders of *Wissenschaft* as a distinct epistemic and ethical tradition was Wilhelm von Humboldt, the early nineteenth-century scholar and bureaucrat who helped establish the University of Berlin in 1810. Humboldt argued that specialized scholarship—what we know today as university-based knowledge and research—formed a particular type of person and was sufficient to fund not only a professional career but also a coherent and self-sustaining form of life. *Wissenschaft* was *Bildung*.

*Bildung*, from the German bilden (to form) and Bild (image or imago), had for most of the eighteenth century referred to a process of moral or ethical formation, the process through which a person formed himself and was formed in accord with exemplary images and exemplars. But whereas the moral exemplars of the eighteenth century had been either classical figures such as Cicero or Christian ones such as Christ, Humboldt presented the modern, specialized scholar as the most apposite moral exemplar. *Wissenschaft*, wrote Friedrich Nietzsche's teacher and renowned philologist Friedrich Ritschl, was "the greatest means of moral education" because it gave students "truth" and "made [them] good."

And so 100 years after Weber and here in Davidson tonight, I want to make a case for *geistige Arbeit*, for an intellectual vocation in a Weberian key.

- I'll expand on Weber's incidental mention of intellectual virtue

- I'll argue for the scholarly practices that sustain such virtues and form people devoted to *geistige Arbeit*
- But unlike Weber and perhaps unlike myself little more than two months ago, I will not do this by defending the university. The practices and virtues I want to protect and help reinvent for the future, I'll suggest, are alive but often incidental to the contemporary university. And so I'll argue for what I call The Academy.

I think it is increasingly important to distinguish The University from what I will term The Academy because contemporary universities, especially those in the United States, are better understood as “multi-versities”—a term coined by the president of the University of California Clark Kerr in 1963 to make sense of his own post-war institution. Consider the University of Virginia where I teach. It is an entertainment and production company (UVA's concerts and events), a healthcare provider, a start-up incubator, a federally-financed research unit, a philanthropic behemoth, a sports franchise, and, perhaps incidentally, a community devoted to education and the creation and transmission of knowledge. And these multifarious activities correspond to a range of distinct purposes. Contemporary universities are expected to educate, democratize, credentialize, and socialize. Over the past century, universities have become all-purpose institutions bound together, as Kerr put it, by little more than “a common governing board” that manages disparate interests and oftentimes competing purposes.

At this point it might be tempting to turn critique into elegy, to indulge a desire for a time that was otherwise. But that would be irresponsible and delusional. The university as a fully coherent, autonomous institution guided by a singular and shared purpose never existed. In a way, universities have always been multi-versities—institutions serving multiple and sometimes competing ends. Faculty members at the University of Paris in thirteenth or fourteenth-century France sought to balance allegiances to the church, the state, and the *universitas litterarum*. Faculty members at the University of Göttingen in 18C Germany struggled to satisfy the mercantilist demands of a state that considered universities just another resource, like forests or mines, with a commitment to scholarly traditions (they made the state a lot of money in student fees from England and also basically invented philology, history, and political science as disciplines). Faculty members at the University of Chicago in nineteenth-century America strove to balance the interests of business, industry, and modern science with the demands of educating undergraduates.

In each instance, however, the practices and ends of the scholarly life—a life devoted to the cultivation of knowledge and education—survived and even flourished, even as they struggled. And so instead of offering an elegy for an institution that never was I want to imagine an institution that could be appealing to these prior instances.

In order to do this, I first want to consider the various ways in which the university's critics and defenders debate its proper ends or purposes. Universities educate students for particular social and political orders; they produce economic value; they support particular churches; they form democratic citizens; they develop intellectual capacities and human flourishing; they educate. Both historically and today universities and colleges have pursued many purposes and served many functions.

But notice that even in this list of ends and justifications, there is a basic distinction. On the one hand, we routinely justify universities by identifying the external goods they serve. Universities, we rightly argue, satisfy a range of political, economic, and social goods. And these justifications vary greatly across time and cultures. On the other hand, we, perhaps less routinely, justify universities by identifying the internal goods they serve, the internal activities that they nourish, sustain, and cultivate.

In order to make logical sense of these various purposes and justifications, I want to distinguish between The Academy and The University by thinking of their relation as part to whole. On my account, The University is the whole and The Academy is part of that whole, if not the most important, or in a more Aristotelian sense, most essential part. Without The Academy there is no University.

First, The University: When I refer to *The University*, I mean the entire institution—administrative structures, organizational processes and norms as well as the sports teams, the HR department, the development office, the health centers, the sustainability initiatives, the global partnerships, the patent offices, and so on. The University so conceived serves a range of external goods—economic, democratic, or social goods.

Second, The Academy: When I refer to *The Academy*, I mean those activities, practices, goals, and norms related to the creation, cultivation, and transmission of knowledge. When we in The Academy teach, learn, and write together in classroom, in labs, in the library, and in our offices, we participate in activities that are, in the first instance, oriented toward epistemic goods, goods bound to safeguarding and renewing knowledge. unique and internally coherent. Despite the deep differences among scholars and students in thirteenth-century Paris, nineteenth-century Berlin, and twenty first-century Davidson, they and you have all participated in the scholarly norms, practices, and virtues that both cut across and are reinvented for different times and cultures. Regardless of the external justifications and purposes of universities, however worthy these ends might be, groups of scholars and students have long maintained and developed epistemic practices, virtues and goods. And it's these that I want to refer to as *The Academy*.

Some might contend that University just is The Academy or that this was true historically. But, as I've suggested, this was never true. The University has always served ends other than or in addition to those related to knowledge that are the function of The Academy.

And yet—and here I'm moving from the descriptive and logical to the more frankly normative—I think that our contemporary arguments for higher education have increasingly tended to focus on The University and emphasize external goods and, thus, the goods universities provide economies, states, and democracies over the internal goods that The Academy nurtures and cultivates. The University serves many worthy purposes, but they are too many, too dispersed and too centrifugal in their pull. The University, you might say, has increasingly subsumed The Academy.

I think many of us faculty members experience this tension between The University and The Academy as a gap between, on the one hand, our more quotidian experiences with our students whom we love, the sentences we long to shape, and the data sets we carefully cultivate of the world and, on the other hand, the anxious defenses and justifications we are all called to make on behalf of institutions we oftentimes don't recognize, the call to apologize for an institution we can no longer defend.

And so I'd contend that we—by which I mean anyone interested in intellectual vocation and the future of knowledge—need to defend the intellectual habits and practices that are particular to The Academy. The Academy, as I'm using the term tonight, refers to a range of practices essential to the flourishing of the university and to the fate of knowledge more broadly. These epistemic ideals and virtues include, but are not limited to: openness to debate, a desire to understand the world, attention to detail, a critical disposition, a demand for evidence, and intellectual generosity and humility. And these ideals and virtues are cultivated in scholarly practices that have long histories. Just two examples (elaborate):

- the philology seminars that developed in German universities in the early 19C (first graduate seminars)
- Physiology labs of Hermann Helmholtz and Emil du Bois-Reymond in mid 19C Berlin

The Academy creates and shares knowledge by forming people and cultivating in them epistemic or intellectual ideals and virtues.

Another benefit of focusing on The Academy instead of The University is that such a focus enhances our capacity to see where these epistemic or academic practices and virtues have been cultivated and continue to thrive (or just survive): not just universities but colleges, museums, libraries, and quirky institutions such as the Warburg Institute in London.

### The Future of Knowledge

In light of the distinction I've drawn between The University and The Academy, I hope it's clear that many of the criticisms leveled against The University are not necessarily criticisms of The Academy. And this observation might help us offer a more robust accounting of The Academy.

A defense of The Academy academy, I'd suggest, is particularly crucial in our digital age, characterized as it is by the unchecked circulation of information and an incapacity to make sense of it. In our moment of alternative facts and the collapse of epistemic authority, The Academy can be a bulwark of trustworthy knowledge.

In 1874 Daniel Coit Gilman, the first president of Johns Hopkins University, wrote that “with their trained observers, their methods of accurate work, their habit of publication, and especially their traditional principles of cooperative study,” research universities acquire, conserve, refine, and distribute knowledge. As I've note, universities have come to do many things. But this core academic function is crucial in ages of epistemic anxiety. And so I'd suggest we think of The Academy in similar ways that we tend to imagine historical technologies extending from the invention of writing and the codex to the printing press and the modern scientific lab. By the late nineteenth century, the research university, with The Academy at its core, had become the consummate technology for organizing knowledge. It had also come to stand in for a whole way of configuring, managing, and cultivating the impulse to know. And what distinguishes The Academy as an institution and its practices has been its commitment to knowledge and the development of humans. In an age in which Silicon-Valley boosters boast of the disruptive powers of digital technologies, The Academy ought to embrace its role as a technology, as a technology that filters, legitimates, and mediates knowledge.

Little more than a decade ago, the rapid growth of the web and increasingly affordable digital technologies were celebrated by many as inherently decentralized and radically democratic media that would usher in new forms of egalitarian knowledge and sustain democracy. But digital democracy has yet to arrive. And this is because the proliferation of digital technologies affords not just more access but more opportunities for individual actors—people, institutions, states—to spread disinformation or manipulate the transmission of knowledge. The post-election panic about “fake news” suggests that another long-term effect of digital technologies may be the gradual erosion of epistemic authority, legitimacy, and trust. The bigger threat than salacious stories is a cultural erosion of trust, whereby citizens and users of digital technologies trust no one and no institution—except perhaps, as a recent Pew survey has shown, their search engines. No democracy can survive such an epistemic collapse.

And this is why we need what I'm calling The Academy now more than ever. At its best The Academy maintains, cultivates, legitimates, and authorizes knowledge. It does this by forming certain types of people and cultivating and safeguarding the virtues and practices needed to do so. The various ways of thinking about universities—as defenders of democracy or engines of economic growth—fall short because they obscure the essential function of the university—the cultivation of epistemic virtues in students and teachers alike. The Academy doesn't produce knowledge; it forms people who embody such knowledge.

My argument is motivated, in part, by my sense that such epistemic practices and values might not survive without academic communities devoted to maintaining them. Whereas universities are mediating institutions, digital social media companies, such as Facebook or Twitter, or MOOCs are simply platforms. Academies sustain communities and practices. Platforms do not. They train users to respond in highly constrained and pre-determined ways. Platforms are “unresponsive.” They simply transmit information in pre-packaged form for monetary gain. And they, as we are witnessing with Facebook in particular these days, are both fragile and capital driven. These are not bugs in the social media system. They are its essential features.

In 1809 Wilhelm von Humboldt, the Prussian bureaucrat who helped design the University of Berlin, described the task of institutions of higher learning as two-fold—to develop both the objective and subjective conditions of knowledge. “The essence of higher academic institutions,” he wrote, was to “join objective knowledge with the process of forming the subject.” Here, Humboldt highlights what I take to be an essential relationship between knowledge and human development, or what he and his German contemporaries termed *Bildung*. Rightly understood institutions of higher learning are committed to the creation of knowledge and the formation of people as two inseparable activities. What makes The Academy is that its sense of purpose and proper functioning has always been wrapped up with the kinds of people it has imagined itself to be forming. Academies are not information distribution devices. They are communities of human development.

### The Moral Limitations of the Academy

And yet The Academy, not to mention The University, even on my normative account, has limitations. And this leads me back to Max Weber and his account of the fate of modern knowledge.

On a trip to the United States in 1904, Weber toured a number of American universities and colleges, including Haverford College just outside of Philadelphia. These visits made a lasting impression. He was particularly fascinated by the “ethos” and “culture” of American colleges, especially the emphasis they placed on forming moral character. Despite the vast differences among them, American universities still maintained something of the “old college system with its boarding-school coercion and its strict discipline.” These collegiate elements, Weber observed, ensured that the primary purpose of American universities was not, as in Germany, scholarship, but rather the “development of personality such that students can learn to assert themselves among equals, grown adults, the development of a disposition that serves as the foundation of the American state and social systems. German universities aimed to create scholars and trained professionals, whereas American universities aimed to create hard-working gentleman capitalists. Weber concluded that German universities and, thus, Germany as a whole, would soon be unable to compete with such “productive power.”

After returning to Germany, Weber continued to reflect on the distinction between an education geared toward forming moral character and one oriented toward the professional training needed in advanced industrial societies, a distinction American institutions helped him better understand.

Weber's thinking culminated in his response to the student group in Munich, his lecture "Science as Vocation." By 1917 Weber had concluded that traditional moral education—be it German *Bildung* or the American collegiate ideal—could not be fully reconciled with modern knowledge and the modern university. The unity of humanistic *Bildung* and *Wissenschaft*—the underlying premise of the German university—was no longer tenable.

"Our aim," he told those gathered in the lecture hall, "must be to enable students to discover the vantage point from which he can judge the matter in light of his own ultimate ideals"—ideals that students received not from the university and its myriad and fragmented disciplines but from elsewhere, from institutions and traditions outside the university.

*Wissenschaft*, Weber famously wrote, was "meaningless" because it could not answer the most basic questions: "what should we do" and "how should we live." Do not turn to science (modern knowledge), he warned, in search of answers to "the ultimate and deepest personal decisions" about their lives.

And this was why, as I suggested earlier, Weber's contemporary critics seized on what they considered his account of a diminished and morally impotent account of modern knowledge. Weber, as one of his contemporary critics put it in 1919, had separated knowledge from its primary end, "the formation of humanity" [*Bildung zur Humanität*].

But recall what he told those students gathered in Munich almost a century ago in 1917:

Science is meaningless because it gives no answer to our question, the only question important for us: "What shall we do and how shall we live?"

And yet a crucial question remained:

In what sense, asked Weber, does "science give 'no' answer [and might not] science might yet be of some use to the one who puts the question correctly?"

In what sense was modern knowledge or science meaningless? Weber considered *Wissenschaft*, modern scholarship, after all, an ethical tradition, the guardian of intellectual rectitude and scholarly practices. And he insisted that the university could still "accomplish something" [etwas leisten].

So, on Weber's account, what could *Wissenschaft* or academic knowledge and the university do, and what could they not do?

1) Modern knowledge/*Wissenschaft* could not ground itself. It was not the "bearer of ultimate values that lent it authority and legitimacy" (Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion*). The values that motivated a student to devote herself to the intellectual vocation were ultimately external to the university. The legitimacy, authority, and flourishing of *Wissenschaft* required scholars to look for values beyond science and the university. [Motivational deficit]. It could never adequately answer the question: Why *Wissenschaft*? Why the intellectual vocation?

2) And so *Wissenschaft* was fragile. Weber's contemporaries turned to *Wissenschaft* to create values and renew the "whole of man." But Weber feared that *Wissenschaft* could not bear such weighty moral demands and worried that those who wanted more from a "new science" would undermine whatever integrity, coherence and goods that it could offer.

3)Wissenschaft also demanded a certain kind of faith or, at the very least, trust. Modern science, Weber famously wrote, had de-magiced [Entzauberung] the modern world. Everything could, “at least in principle,” be explained. We no longer had to stare in dumb wonder at the movements of the stars or tremble in terrorizing fear of the ocean. Because we could explain nature. But such explanations didn’t extinguish belief and wonder. They merely shifted their object. Not everyone could explain everything, only scientists could. And even then only “in principle.” The de-magiced [Ent-zauberung] world required a belief in expertise and specialized knowledge. And that was a wondrous but also a dangerous thing. The limits of science had to be articulated and respected. Weber’s disenchanting science was a warning against prophets posing as scholars, declaiming moral truths in the name of *Wissenschaft* in lecture halls where their charismatic authority could go unchecked.

## Conclusion

So how might Weber’s now 100 year-old lecture help us consider the plight of higher education today in 2017? I think Weber can help us understand what universities and colleges can and cannot do—and most importantly help us focus our efforts on sustaining scholarly and intellectual practices of knowledge or The Academy as I’ve called it. And such a defense requires a clear articulation of what The Academy cannot do.

Neither The University nor The Academy can provide students with ready-made answers to “life’s most meaningful questions.”

There is an increasingly common tendency, perhaps understandable in this moment of uncertainty about what will become of the university, to exaggerate claims about what the university can achieve. The university has become, for many, a sacred institution, a keeper of devotional practices and self-sustaining forms of life. **[President Sullivan’s missive about the alleged purported “sacrilege” perpetuated by our students by covering the Jefferson statue]** The sacralization of the university is, I’d suggest, not only naïve but pernicious. I’ve made the case tonight that at their best universities sustain epistemic practices and virtues—the scholarly practices of the academy. But universities lack the ethical resources to provide ultimate ends or a comprehensive vision of the good, the true, and the beautiful. Their goods are proximate. My commitment to scholarly critique, evidence, and open debate doesn’t grant me the authority to tell my undergraduates how to live and to what they ought to devote their lives. In fact, my own scholarly commitments and my own desire to know are ultimately motivated by moral commitments external to the university.

Rightly understood, The Academy is not a church or a monastery. It can offer a substantive notion of character and its own set of practices and virtues but it cannot offer a clear and determinate *Weltanschauung* or fully integrated form of life—as Weber’s critics demanded from him and the research university in 1917. The Academy, much less the University, is not the bearer of our most fundamental or inscrutable values. Universities, quipped Weber in Munich, were not even equipped to adequately defend the value of modern science, much less form the souls of young students.

And yet The Academy, aware of its limits and confident in its own practices and virtues, can form people who think well, value knowledge, and are capable of reflecting on their own deepest commitments as well as those of others with care, humility, and generosity. The purpose of The Academy is to cultivate those activities, practices, and virtues whose end is the creation, transmission, and legitimation of knowledge and the education of others to do the same. And that’s something worth defending.

Let me give you an example of what I mean by The University-The Academy distinction with respect to recent events in Charlottesville and by way of a revision to an earlier argument I made in an article published right after [[“For Moral Clarity, Don’t Look to Universities”](#)]:

Terresa Sullivan, President of UVA, runs an institution, The University, at the heart of which is The Academy. The Academy, as I’ve described it, stands for and requires all kinds of ethical (epistemic) virtues related to the creation, fostering, dissemination of knowledge. And, I’d argue, these epistemic practices and virtues entail a commitment to the moral dignity and equality of persons: This, of course, is compatible with the many ways that The Academy itself has violated its own ethical principles historically. And so when 400 hundred white supremacists marched across my back yard and across the Lawn at the University of Virginia chanting: Jews Will Not Replace us and White Lives Matter with tiki torches, they claimed that the young women of color in my class didn’t belong there; they claimed that my Jewish students who come visit me in office hours didn’t belong there. They denied their very capacity to participate in The Academy, to be formed by its practices, and to share in its goods. And so members of The Academy can and should denounce the neo-Nazis and white supremacists who marched on the Lawn at the University of Virginia because they are an affront to the ethics of The Academy. Presidents Sullivan’s initial failure to do so—repeatedly referring to them as “torch wielding protesters” who had a right to free speech— was a failure to defend The Academy and its virtues that it’s committed to. The Academy is for all who love knowledge, seek the truth, and are committed to the communities that sustain these desires.

*This is the slightly edited text of a talk I delivered as the [Hansford M. Epes Distinguished Lecture in the Humanities](#) at Davidson College on October 19, 2017. It gathers some of my thinking and writing from the past six months around the question of the university. And, as with most things I write these days, I am particularly grateful to Matt McAdam for helping me think through these big questions and for making generous contributions.*

<https://chadwellmon.com/2017/10/26/after-the-university-long-live-the-academy/> (accessed 11/24/2019)