

ON THE UNIVERSALITY  
OF THE UNIVERSITY:  
A RESPONSE TO JEAN-LUC MARION<sup>1</sup>

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“Gratuity is part of the fundamental meaning of education. Only if we embrace this gratuity at the heart of the university do we in fact respond to the crisis of fragmentation.”



1. JEAN-LUC MARION ON THE FRAGMENTATION  
OF THE UNIVERSITY

Concerns about the fragmentation of the modern university that results from overspecialization and professionalization are nothing new;<sup>2</sup> in the contemporary situation, fragmentation has achieved the status, beyond any worrisome possibility, of an evident fact.<sup>3</sup>

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1. I would like to dedicate this essay to my colleagues in the Humanities Department at Villanova University in gratitude.

2. Two classic texts are Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling's *Lectures on the Method of Academic Study* (1802–03) and Cardinal John Henry Newman's *The Idea of a University* (1852 and 1848).

3. See Alasdair MacIntyre, “The end of education: the fragmentation of

But Jean-Luc Marion, in a recent lecture on the universality of the university, which is being published here, has pointed out that the fragmentation goes further than is typically recognized: what is being lost is not only universality, but also the specialization and the professions for which the universality is sacrificed. The fragmentation has become so radical, we might say, that the fragments themselves are dissolving. If higher education aspires to nothing but practical relevance to the actual historical situation, it is already obsolete the moment it comes to completion. As Marion brilliantly puts it, given the constant disappearance of the professions for which the students are being trained, the university cannot have a future, because it does not even have a present. This remark reveals that a certain temporal fragmentation corresponds to the theoretical fragmentation: just as there is no unifying principle that would transcend the particularity of the disciplines, and indeed of the professions, so too there is no principle that transcends the particularity of the present moment to unite it with the past and future. As philosophers have always observed about time, without any connection with past and future, the present cannot avoid simply evanescing, which is precisely the situation that Marion says besets the contemporary university. It goes without saying that this is a crisis for the university, but if it is true that the university represents the culture it is meant to serve in the sense of being the place wherein that culture thinks itself and so makes itself in a certain way explicit, then this crisis concerns more than just professional academics.

The question that faces us is nevertheless where to find, or perhaps to recover, the principle of unity, such that we may once again use the word “university” in a meaningful way. Marion observes that the term originally indicated the community of scholars who came together to pursue the life of the mind. This observation raises the same question from a different perspective: what is the nature of the common good sufficient to make this community possible? But we need to ask the question, not simply out of historical interest, but, as Marion does, in a way that casts light on our current situation: What, today, brings people togeth-

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the American university,” *Commonweal* CXXXIII: 18 (20 October 2006): 10–14, and *God, Philosophy, and Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), esp. 173–80.

er in the university, and what *ought* to bring us together? I wish to reflect on this question here in terms of “catholicity,” a term that not only includes the basic theme of “universality” that Marion discusses, but adds to this a reference to the *community* of persons created by the existence of a truly common good, insofar as “catholic” means “according to the whole.” The importance of community will become apparent toward the end of these reflections.

Without going into the details of Marion’s lecture, which is here to be read for itself, I take the essence of the positive response to the diagnosis he presents to be the following: the principle of unity cannot be found in the endless diversity of things known, but, as Descartes understood, resides in the *knower* the mind of whom is like the sun that casts its light over an infinity of objects. But more radically still, as Pascal understood even if Descartes did not, the knower is in fact more fundamentally a *lover*. One cannot come to have knowledge without learning the difference between what one knows and what one does not know—without, that is, learning the limits of human knowledge. This capacity for knowledge lies, as it were, between two essential unknowns, which is what makes human intelligence essentially and inescapably finite: on the one hand, the knower can never know *himself*, because the self can never be an *object* of knowledge, and he can never know the infinitely other, God. The love of truth exceeds, in fact, the desire to know, because knowledge itself rests within an essentially unknowable desire for what remains essentially unknowable. We are lovers of truth only because we are first of all, and most fundamentally, *lovers*. Though Marion does not put the matter exactly in this way, we might say that, paradoxically, the principle of unity that gathers knowers together in the university is their ignorance.

The crisis of the university is more generally a crisis of reason, a crisis to which John Paul II’s 1998 encyclical *Fides et ratio* (=FR) was in part a response. The encyclical’s assessment of the root causes of this crisis raises the question of whether Marion’s approach gets to the heart of the matter, or in fact reproduces in a different way the cause. As John Paul II puts it:

Sundered from [a truth which transcends them], individuals are at the mercy of caprice, and their state as person ends up being judged by pragmatic criteria based essentially upon experimental data, in the mistaken

belief that technology must dominate all. It has happened therefore that reason, rather than voicing the human orientation towards truth, has wilted under the weight of so much knowledge and little by little has lost the capacity to lift its gaze to the heights, not daring to rise to the truth of being. Abandoning the investigation of being, modern philosophical research has concentrated instead upon human knowing. Rather than make use of the human capacity to know the truth, modern philosophy has preferred to accentuate the ways in which this capacity is limited and conditioned.<sup>4</sup>

In a way similar to Marion, the encyclical speaks of the “weight of so much knowledge” as a kind of obstacle. Instead of turning to the unknown, however, the encyclical points instead to being. John Paul suggests that, more fundamentally than discovering the limits of human reason, we need first to discover its positive relation to truth, and that this requires the recovery of a philosophy of being that has a “*genuinely metaphysical* range, capable . . . of transcending empirical data in order to attain something absolute, ultimate and foundational in its search for truth.”<sup>5</sup> In his own lecture, Marion ends with a reflection on truth, and the dependence of truth on love. What difference does it make, we ought to ask, whether we think of truth on the basis of a love, as it were, “without being,” or we think of truth instead in terms of a love that cannot dispense with being—whether we approach the problem of the catholicity of the university from an exclusively phenomenological perspective or from a more traditional metaphysical perspective? In the following, we will first consider three implications of an ontological sense of truth for the life of the university before turning at the end briefly to a direct comparison with Marion’s proposal.

## 2. THE UNITY OF BEING

The word “truth” is not one a person hears very often in the contemporary university. This rarity, we suggest, is not due in the first place to the cynicism and skepticism generated by postmod-

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4. John Paul II, *FR*, 5.

5. *Ibid.*, 83.

ern critiques of what are taken to be traditional notions. While such cynicism may be found in some philosophy departments and perhaps even more commonly in English departments, those working in the university for the most part would be willing to say that what they teach their students is not only skills that are genuinely—i.e., “truly”—useful, but also knowledge, or at the very least “information,” which they would insist is not a deceptive fiction but has a certain objective purchase, we might say. The reason they nevertheless do not normally describe their activity as the exploration of and diffusion of truth, it seems to me, is that the description strikes one as unnecessarily grandiose. The word “truth” indicates a good deal more than the “correctness of information, for all intents and purposes.” If one has thoroughly explained an idea in the classroom, or as it is sometimes put, “conveyed content,” it would seem wholly gratuitous to add afterwards, “Oh, and by the way, all of this is true.” It would seem wholly gratuitous because calling it true does not seem to add anything to that content; it does not seem to bear any necessary relevance to the specific ends of what is being discussed in the class or even of the discipline more generally that the particular course represents. But this sense of relative irrelevance, I propose, is precisely an expression of the fragmentation we noted at the outset.

What, exactly, does it “add” to say that what a particular discipline studies bears on truth? As Josef Pieper has shown in his remarkable little book on the subject,<sup>6</sup> according to the traditional understanding represented by Aquinas, truth is coextensive with being. While the formal definition of truth is the “adequation of the intellect and reality,” this definition does not exclude other meanings. Instead, truth is analogical, just as is being, with which truth, as a “transcendental,” is convertible. Thus, the word includes, as an effect of *adequatio*, the quality of the propositions that give that *adequatio* expression, but also the “foundational” aspect, the identity of truth and being, which makes the *adequatio* with the human mind possible.<sup>7</sup> It is this last aspect that I

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6. Josef Pieper, *The Truth of All Things*, published in *Living the Truth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 11–105.

7. As Aquinas explains in *De veritate* 1.2ad4, the truth that is the same as the being of things is nevertheless itself due to a correspondence with intellect: in this case, with the divine intellect.

wish to highlight here. To say that the “content” of a discipline is true is not in the first place to say that the content is accurate, or reliable, or in fact effective in bringing about a skill or mastery in that particular area. Instead, in the first place, it indicates that the discipline is ultimately “about the world,” that is, it represents a particular face of reality, or in more technical terms, it is the presentation of being under a certain aspect.

Putting the matter thus recalls Aristotle’s method of differentiating what we today call the disciplines, a method that was then taken up by the “scholastics” who populated the first universities. According to this Aristotelian approach, each discipline is a study of being in a particular respect, a study of being *qua* x, y, or z. The significance of this formulation is, unfortunately, not difficult to overlook. One could, for example, quite easily think that each discipline represents a part of a (collective) whole, which is being generally, and indeed not of an organic whole, which would imply at least a sort of internal connection among the various parts, but of a mechanical whole in which the parts, however interdependent they might be, bear no such relationship to each other. In this case, to say that each discipline studies being under a certain aspect might be helpful as a way of thinking about the general problem of how the various disciplines fit together, but it does not have any relevance *inside* each discipline; it does not have relevance, that is, for how the discipline understands itself and how it is practiced. When I am talking philosophically about the universality of the university, for example, I may acknowledge that physics is the study of being insofar as it is mobile matter as distinct from being in other respects, but as a physicist I am happy simply to say that I study matter in motion, or as many dictionaries put it, “matter, energy, and their interaction.”

But in fact the formulation does not allow this interpretation. There is no “part-whole” relationship here, most obviously because being is not in the first place a collective whole; it is not a totality, in relation to which all the things of the world would represent so many pieces. Instead, each of those things *is* just as much as the whole of reality *is*. Being is transcendental in the classical sense, which means it is not a species or genus, it is not a totality or a universal concept, but it is what all things, and all aspects of all things, share insofar as they are at all. The first

point I wish to make with respect to the fragmentation of the university is that the Aristotelian manner of differentiating the disciplines offers a principle of unity that remains no matter how far the differentiation extends, or in other words a unity that is not in principle threatened by specialization. The contrast with Marion is illuminating: Marion despairs of finding a principle of unity in “the diversity of things known,” and so turns away from the “objective” world, as it were, and toward the subject, that is, to “the unique, unified enterprise of knowing.”<sup>8</sup> This turn is of course necessitated by Marion’s general rejection of metaphysics. We will consider the implications of this turn briefly at the end, but we note for now that this response simply concedes the fragmentation of the things known: it simply posits a knower who can, as it were, gather the fragments together. There is also a contrast between this point and the much closer one made by MacIntyre in *God, Philosophy, and Universities*: a genuine university presupposes a unified concept of the universe.<sup>9</sup> Now, it may be (and in another context I would want to argue it necessarily is) the case that a unified cosmology is necessary to have a true *univers-ity*, but it nevertheless makes a difference whether one locates the principle of unity in *physics*, that is, in nature, or one recognizes that the principle is genuinely *meta*-physical, and so not only transcends any and all distinctions, whether they be between nature and history, nature and freedom, nature and the artificial, and the like, but indeed is capacious enough, in its superdeterminacy, to accommodate whatever new insights might be had in science or any other field (including, for example, theology).<sup>10</sup>

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8. See Jean-Luc Marion, “The Universality of the University,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 40 (Spring 2013): 72. I use the word “subject” here, but it is important to note that Marion rejects this term as a correlate of the object and so essentially bound up with what he takes to be the subject-object dualism of metaphysical thinking. He prefers, instead, the term “the gifted” (l’adonné), the one to whom the “givenness” of phenomena is given (see *Étant donné: Essai d’une phénoménologie de la donation* [Paris: PUF, 1997], esp. §25, 343–61), which is not far from what Thomas Prüfer used to call the “dative of manifestation” in his interpretation of phenomenology.

9. MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, and Universities*, 95, 174.

10. I am not at all claiming that MacIntyre would deny the significance of metaphysics in this regard, but am simply highlighting the importance of *being* as such, beyond a conception of the universe (as a condition for that concep-

The point, in any event, is that, from this perspective, the great diversity of the disciplines, and all their sub-disciplines, are united in fact by a single subject: they are all a study of *being*, albeit in diverse respects. This relatedness to reality, to the world, and so to all the other disciplines *in* the world, is implicitly signaled by speaking of the various disciplines as occupied in an essential way *with truth*, insofar as truth has a foundational relation to being. It seems to me that the reluctance to speak about truth in the contemporary university is not due in the first place to epistemological scruples, as one might be tempted to think. Instead, it is due to the metaphysical implications of the notion of truth. In speaking about what one studies as *true*, one is in a certain sense going out beyond one's discipline, or better yet: one is acknowledging that the discipline exceeds itself, that is, it "connects" to a reality greater than itself, indeed, to reality *simpliciter*. This connection, however, entails a kind of burden that a "fragmented scholar," in his self-sealed isolation, wouldn't feel (or more accurately would fail to be aware of), since it implies that there is "something" beyond the limits of his speciality that thus lays a claim to his thinking in a certain respect even inside the discipline, "something" to which he is therefore responsible. But this is precisely the point. The very reluctance is a sign of the fragmentation, and an indication of the importance of the principle of unity. To recover the language of truth in the academy, to work, study, and live there under the sign of truth, would already be a significant step in response to contemporary fragmentation.

### 3. UNIVERSALITY AND PARTICULARITY

The "transcendentality," and so the "analogicity," of being as the principle of the unity of the university has great consequences for the way we conceive of the "inter-relation" among the disciplines. It is not possible, in the present context, to consider anything but a single aspect.<sup>11</sup> Here, we will focus simply on how

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tion), which MacIntyre does not himself make explicit.

11. For further aspects, see the issue of *Communio* on "Faith, Metaphysics, and the Sciences": 28 (Fall 2001). See also David L. Schindler, "The Given as Gift: Creation and Disciplinary Abstraction in Science," in *Ordering Love:*



truth, understood specifically in its ontological dimension, opens up what we might call a “depth dimension” inside of the different disciplines that allows us to think of their relation to each other in a manner quite different from the conventional one. Above, we noted that to understand each discipline as a study of being *qua* “x” does not mean to think of each as focused on a part of a (collective) whole, but we did not elaborate an alternative. To say that a discipline studies being *qua* “x” is to say that it studies not a part, but the (transcendent) *whole*, though from a particular perspective, under a particular aspect. The particularity, in this sense, is not the matter itself being studied; it is rather a qualification of the actual subject of study, which is shared by every discipline. This means that, understood as true in the ontological sense, the different disciplines will bear an *analogical* relationship to each other, that what differentiates them does not compromise their unity. It also means, moreover, that, insofar as philosophy is, among other things, a study of the whole in the sense of being concerned with being *qua* being, that each discipline is essentially philosophical in itself, at its heart. In the original universities, what we today call “science” was called “natural philosophy”: more than just a different name, the term indicates a different self-understanding of the discipline (or configuration of disciplines), for it expresses the fact that this discipline is not occupied in an isolated way with its own set of “data,” separate from everything else, but that it explores an aspect of the reality that occupies all knowers. In this respect, no special effort, no artificial imposition of categories, is required to figure out how natural philosophy is related to the other “branches” of philosophy, whereas “science,” by contrast, takes itself to be essentially separate from the disciplines concerned with the whole as such, philosophy and theology, and so from all the others. I am suggesting that a recovery of the ontological dimension of truth, and a recovery of truth as the primary concern of the disciplines, implies that every discipline is, at its core, a branch of philosophy, if you will. If it is difficult to conceive of appropriate terms to designate this for the various disciplines that would be analogous to “natural philosophy” for “science,” we can at least recall that,

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*Liberal Societies and the Memory of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 383–429.

in the contemporary university, no matter what discipline one works in, one in fact bears the title “doctor of philosophy.”

To say that each discipline is philosophical at its core, more concretely speaking, means that the fundamental philosophical questions concerning purpose and essence—the “why?” and the “what is . . . ?” questions—belong to each of the disciplines in a particular form, that is, according to their own particularity. Indeed, the wonder, the astonishment at being, that is said to determine the particular “pathos” of the philosopher,<sup>12</sup> need not be withheld from the practitioners of the “other” disciplines, or considered extraneous—i.e., non-essential—to them. Thus, the “working physicist” today is typically understood to be one who takes his discipline for granted along with its essential definitions, categories, and methods, and attempts to use these tools and to apply this knowledge, so to speak, in some as yet unstudied area. At a conference not too long ago that attempted to bring together philosophers and scientists to discuss the relation between these two fields, a scientist expressed indignation at the suggestion that philosophical concepts might have sufficient relevance for his work that he would have to study them in order to do his own work properly. It is unrealistic, and in a certain sense unjust,<sup>13</sup> he said, given the enormous amount of material that a physicist has to master in order to be competent in his own field, to ask him to study a whole other discipline in addition. His complaint would be decisive if in fact philosophy represented another discipline, over against physics, for example. But I am suggesting that physics, as the study of being from a particular perspective, is *itself* philosophical, in this particular respect: if physics is the study of matter in motion, it is not foreign to physics to reflect on what matter in fact *is*, what motion *is*, what are the presuppositions governing the methods generally used to study these things in the field—for example, what is implied in the quantifying of motion and the use of calculus to measure it—and to what extent are these assumptions adequate to the reality of matter and motion, why and to what extent do they fall

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12. Plato, *Theaetetus*, 155d.

13. Especially if we define justice as Plato did in the *Republic* as “minding one’s own business,” i.e., doing the work that belongs properly to one rather than meddling in the work that belongs to others: *Republic*, 433a–b.

short, what is the relation of matter to nature more generally, and nature to reality more generally, and what, in the end, *is* physics after all?<sup>14</sup>

What distinguishes the philosopher from the physicist is not that the philosopher is occupied with the whole and the physicist is occupied with a part, or that the philosopher studies being while the physicist studies matter in motion. Instead, they *both* study being, but while the philosopher studies being, so to speak, in itself, the physicist studies being insofar as it comes to expression in matter in motion. So, if the physicist, *qua* physicist, would not study the specifically philosophical question of being *qua* being, he nevertheless would, or ought to, ask the questions related to his particular field in a philosophical way. Does one become less of a physicist, properly speaking, if one reflects on the questions we just listed? Isn't it rather the case that asking these questions would enable one to appropriate the discipline in a

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14. Now, it is true that both Aristotle (*Metaphysics* 6.1) and Aquinas (in his commentary on Aristotle: *VI Metaph.* 1, 1151) claim the contrary of what we are proposing here: they claim instead that the particular sciences *presuppose* the existence and essence of their subject matter, and proceed from there to determine its essential attributes. Philosophy is the only science that inquires into its own essence and existence. Their claim, however, is more ambiguous than it initially appears. There are three things to be said with respect to this claim. First, when they say "presuppose," they mean that the subject matter is established, in its essence and existence, by the higher sciences, and ultimately by philosophy (and theology). In this respect, they already presuppose a philosophical context in which the particular science is pursued, a context that thus differs radically from the present, fragmented one—in which, for example, the particular sciences do not understand themselves as receiving their foundations from philosophy. Second, in part no doubt as a result of this separation, the particular sciences in the contemporary world have not tended in fact to take the essence and existence of their subjects for granted. This disinclination began with the positivism that Galileo introduced into physics, and which entered from there into all of the other disciplines. Thus, for example, science tends *not* to begin from an assumption of the integrity of nature as an intrinsic reality, the study of literature tends *not* to accept the existence of a "whole" called a "text" (or, for that matter, the reality of beauty), anthropology tends *not* to affirm the distinct reality of man apart from other animals, psychology tends *not* to accept the existence of the "psyche," that is, the soul, history tends *not* to accept the legitimacy of a narrative account of events, and so forth. Third, one may argue that the need for the particular disciplines to become *themselves* philosophical, and thus to reflect on their own particular origins, is not simply a function of the fragmentation of the disciplines from each other and their subsequent internal collapse, but may be seen also in a positive light as a recognition of the relative autonomy of the disciplines.

truly foundational way? Clearly, it is only the person asking these sorts of questions that would be capable of genuine innovation in his or her field—one thinks immediately of Einstein in physics as an example. But I hasten to point out that the primary purpose of these sorts of questions is not to call the basic assumptions in the disciplines fundamentally into question, as it were, to suggest that they might all be wrong. In other words, by saying they ought to be practiced philosophically, I am not advocating constant revolution as the normal *modus operandi* of the disciplines. The primary point, instead, is to grasp one's discipline from its very roots in reality. Wonder is not the same thing as doubt; to reflect on these fundamental questions in one's discipline in the spirit of wonder is first of all to make the reality of one's discipline evident to oneself *precisely as true*, rather than to determine what needs to be changed.

To ask the fundamental questions in one's discipline, to appropriate one's discipline *in truth*, is at the very same time to assess its place in relation to what lies beyond its proper limits, or at the very least to open one's discipline up to that assessment, as I indicated at the end of the previous section.<sup>15</sup> But if what I have just said is true, this means that the more deeply one enters into a particular discipline, the more one opens up to the other disciplines. Here we see a sharp contrast with what typically goes by the name of “interdisciplinarity” in the contemporary university. It is significant that the notion of interdisciplinarity is being increasingly promoted in the academy, whereas the term was unknown just a few decades ago (“interdisciplinarity” is not included in the 1989 reprint of the 1971 edition of the OED, for example), for it reveals how pressing the crisis of fragmentation has become. But “interdisciplinarity” is an inadequate response to the problem of fragmentation for a variety of reasons, of which I shall indicate only two that have a connection both to the argument we are making, and to each other. The first is that it is superficial: “interdisciplinarity” typically means a “crossing of traditional boundaries separating the disciplines” by promoting

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15. Does it belong to the philosopher as such to determine the place of the disciplines in the whole, or the practitioners of each of the disciplines? The answer to this question is not immediately evident. It would seem to require a kind of asymmetrical collaboration between philosophy as such and each discipline as philosophically appropriated.

cooperation among experts in particular disciplines in some joint project, whether that project be in research or in teaching. The problem is that this notion brings the disciplines together, so to speak, only at their outer edges, which leaves them still in their essence merely extrinsically related to each other—i.e., still fragmented. The extrinsicism is implied by the very phrase “crossing boundaries.” Within the separate disciplines, the experts still work according to conventional methods in isolation from the whole, but they bring the results of their investigations, after the fact, so to speak, in relation to results produced in the other disciplines.

The second problem is that this “crossing of boundaries” in fact blurs what is distinctive about each, it compromises the good and true limits that properly define each discipline. In the concrete, scholars engaged in interdisciplinary projects often complain about dissatisfaction because they cannot be serious about the particular kind of exploration that would belong more properly to their own field, but have to generalize and oversimplify in order to keep things accessible to their collaborators, who were trained in a different field. Moreover, those who pursue a particular discipline specifically within an interdisciplinary department are often taken to be “lightweights” in the field by their colleagues who work strictly inside the discipline. In a word, a discipline that is pursued in an interdisciplinary department is seen as a “watered down” version of the sorts of studies that would elsewhere be pursued in a more focused, sophisticated, technically astute—in short, “serious”—way elsewhere. Thus, one might say that “interdisciplinarity” as it is conventionally understood responds to the problem of fragmentation only by adding to it the problem of confusion.

An alternative approach suggested by the discussion above would understand the disciplines as intrinsically related to each other because of their common roots in being. The appropriate image here would not be so much the “crossing of traditional boundaries” as it would the connection of a wheel’s spokes in the hub at the center, though of course a spatial image will always be inadequate in significant ways. The point is that, insofar as the disciplines are understood as being *essentially philosophical*, that is, insofar as each is concerned with *truth*, with the whole of reality from a particular perspective, it means that the closer each comes to its own proper center the closer it gets to all the other

disciplines, properly conceived. Connecting with people in other disciplines, from this perspective, does not entail abandoning or even relativizing what is proper to one's own in order to collaborate superficially in the study of something only tangentially related to what drew one to study a particular discipline in the first place. Instead, it means that from the very center of one's discipline one can speak to those standing at the heart of their own, that this center, which in a way belongs jointly to all the disciplines, though in a special way to philosophy and theology, represents an inexhaustible source that enables mutually enriching exchange. As a concrete example of what this looks like, I can offer the Humanities department at Villanova, in which I have been privileged to participate the past eight years. This department has sought to conceive "interdisciplinarity" along the lines presented here; it has focused hiring on those who love their particular disciplines in such a way that they spontaneously reflect on the fundamental questions that define them (rather than simply those who express a kind of loose interest in a variety of subjects, which would be a more conventional view of "interdisciplinarity"), and has thus assembled a faculty that has never run out of things to discuss fruitfully together in spite of the fact that the members represent a real diversity of disciplines.

#### 4. *UNIVERSIO, CONVERSIO, AND CONVERSATION*

For our final point, we will turn to consider the experience of students in the classroom. In a classic text from the *Republic*, Plato defined education as "the art of turning the whole soul around" in order that it may be directed toward the real.<sup>16</sup> In a recent book, Andrew Delbanco discusses the importance that the notion of conversion had in the way education was conceived in the original universities on American soil, which were explicitly Protestant in their inspiration, and argues for the continued relevance of some version of this notion in contemporary education.<sup>17</sup> He offers as an example the hypothetical situation of two

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16. Plato, *Republic*, VII, 518c–d.

17. Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 45–53. To be sure, Delbanco does not

students going to see a performance of *King Lear*, but we can imagine a similar situation in the classroom: two students may be introduced to the same novel in a particular class, they may both understand all of the essential ideas expressed in it, and they may be equally capable of explaining what was said in class about the novel's themes and their significance—and nevertheless one of the students simply shrugs all of this off (at least after the test) and continues on his merry way, while the other is *captivated* by it: the novel occasions an epiphany, it breaks upon him like a revelation, and his life is never quite the same. What exactly is the difference in the two experiences? Although the difference could no doubt be fruitfully described in a number of different ways, in the present context we might put the matter thus: the second student grasps the novel *precisely as true*. In other words, while the first student sees what the novel expresses, and what the teacher says about it, as so much “information”—or perhaps more accurately, as so many pieces of information—to be received and recorded, the second student sees the particular ideas precisely as a revelation, as a disclosure, therefore, of “something more.” This “something more” is not another idea, a further bit of information, but a reality of a different order altogether, which comes to expression specifically as a transformation of what is being communicated, a change in its quality.

In what, exactly, does this change consist? It seems to me that there are at least three things that we may say about it in the present context. In the first place, in the vision of ideas as true, they become crystallized, so to speak, in their unity with one another. A person often describes the experience as things “finally coming together” for him. When things come together, each individual “thing” appears differently from the way it did before. What he has learned is no longer a disorganized heap of “data.”

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use the word “conversion,” though he does point to Augustine's *Confessions* as relating an analogous experience. He speaks instead of “the moment of electric connection” (47). Delbanco's book is not a very substantial contribution to the problem we are discussing; instead, it tends toward the sentimental, arguably because it does not view education as concerned with anything one might call “transcendent.” The word “truth,” incidentally, seems to appear only once, in his appreciation of William James' pragmatism, which presents “a distinctively American conception of truth as always in flux, in-the-making rather than ready-made” (60). Either “in-the-making” or “ready-made”! What is lacking here, clearly, is a specifically ontological notion.

Without an underlying unity, data cannot properly be seen to be true, but collapse into a series of “facts,” isolated bits of content that are not *intrinsically* meaningful. Instead, they require for their meaning a context, which, because it is not intrinsic to them, is simply extrinsic, and therefore relatively arbitrary. Students in this situation more or less consciously feel themselves to be manipulated, and called to manipulate in turn: they describe their writing of exams as giving the teacher “what he wants to hear”—because they received it as little more than “what he wanted to say”; after the exam, the facts are freed for the imposition of new contexts, as circumstances require.

Second, things can “come together” only by virtue of a principle that transcends each of them in itself and so is able to grant them unity. It is not simply the (individual) knower that presents this principle, for if it were, we would not be able to speak of a “turning” of the soul, a *movement* from one point to another: If the soul itself were the principle of unity, there would be no need to move, nothing beyond the soul *toward which* it could turn.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the etymological roots of the word “education” imply that it is a “leading out,” which of course also implies necessarily a “leading towards or into.” Robert Spaemann describes education, in a way that echoes Plato’s allegory of the cave, as an “introduction to reality.”<sup>19</sup> This description accords with the identification in *Fides et ratio* of *being* as what transcends all the particularity of empirical data, as we saw at the outset. It is a principle that transcends not only the “objects” of knowledge, but even the knower himself and all knowers—indeed, even the lover and all lovers.<sup>20</sup> There cannot be a *con-versio*, a radical turn-

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18. One might argue that the soul can turn towards itself—insofar as there is a certain gap between what it is and what it knows of itself, or “thinks” it is. An emphasis on the fact that the soul is a mystery to itself, a mystery that tends to disappear from its vision, would thus seem to allow one to speak of its coming to self-knowledge as a kind of conversion. While there is a certain truth to this, I am going to suggest that this is part of a turning toward what is *greater than* the self, that a positive principle is needed for conversion.

19. See Robert Spaemann, “Education as an Introduction to Reality,” in *A Robert Spaemann Reader: Philosophical Essays on Nature, God, and the Human Person*, eds. D.C. and Jeanne Schindler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

20. We are obviously speaking here of human knowers and lovers.



ing of the whole soul, without a transcendent principle, which, as transcendent, is able to confer unity: a *con-versio* is a *uni-versio*.

This leads to the third aspect. Because the principle of unity transcends not only the things known but the knower himself, it enables a genuine community in knowing; it enables a real self-transcendence and therefore contact with others, the possibility of real intimacy. In this case, we might read the prefix of “conversio,” not in its function as an intensifier, but more literally as “with”: *conversio* is thus a *turning together toward reality*. Marion, as we mentioned, observes that the word “university” originally meant the community of scholars, but quickly came to mean the unity of the sciences they studied. In fact, however, these two meanings are inseparable from one another, because there can be no community without a common good, without a principle of unity that transcends each of the individuals joined together. Thus, as Plato illustrates so memorably in his allegory of the cave (which is, he says, an image of education), truth liberates, among other things, from isolation, from the absolute solitude of what we might call pure phenomenality, in which I do not look beyond how things happen to appear to me. It is a liberation *into* being, into the reality that connects each of us to himself and at the same time connects us all together.

Now, Delbanco is certainly right that there is something “gratuitous” and unpredictable about conversion<sup>21</sup>; it is not something that can be entered onto a lesson plan and systematically produced. We ought to recall that the two students in the example with such radically different experiences were in the same classroom. It nevertheless makes a difference whether one actually *defines* education as the “art of conversion,” or one instead thinks of conversion as an essentially “private or personal matter,” an event that is *accidental* to the university, which is essentially concerned with the communication of “masterable” skills and knowledge, that is, training students in one or more disciplines. It is entirely possible to conceive of the university as ordered, above all, to *truth*, and nevertheless recognize that the achievement of this end lies in some sense beyond the control of the administrators and educators, beyond the deliberate efforts of the students. If the truth is truly transcendent, this lack of control over it is not

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21. Delbanco, *College*, 47.

an unfortunate coincidence. Gratuity is part of the fundamental meaning of education. Only if we embrace this gratuity at the heart of the university do we in fact respond to the crisis of fragmentation, and allow the university to be genuinely catholic.

To close this section, I wish to consider a very concrete implication of the lack of catholicity, namely, the utter incapacity for conversation that one tends to find in the contemporary classroom. The capacity for conversation presupposes a *conversio*, which in turn presupposes a *universio*.<sup>22</sup> I have proposed that a specifically *ontological* sense of truth is necessary in order to see ideas as revelatory, and so truly interconnected. It is this that makes ideas “diaphanous,” radiant with a meaning that is in some sense infinite: what Pieper referred to as the “inexhaustible light” of the truth of things.<sup>23</sup> Without this, considered in detachment from their truth, things can mean, as it were, nothing more than themselves alone. In this case, there is in fact nothing to be achieved beyond the stating of the facts, the formulation of the idea as clearly as possible. At best, one can “make connections,” which in reality means only the stringing together of these facts or ideas through a lecture. What becomes pointless is the *seminar*, which is meant to turn on conversation (in both senses of the phrase). The common experience of a seminar, when an ontological sense of truth is lacking, is something like the following: the teacher, seeking to avoid simply lecturing to students, begins by posing a question concerning the reading everyone was supposed to have done. Most of the students are annoyed: the teacher is an expert, who gets paid to know the answer to the question he is asking. If he is asking it, then, it is either a (time-wasting) charade, or it is a test. There is a painful period of silence while the students wait for the classmate or two who always know the answer or who never do but always talk anyway (and they are held in contempt by the other students in either case) to offer a

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22. This presupposition does not mean that these have to occur in a temporal sense one after the other: it may in fact be the case, for example, that it is precisely a conversation that brings about a conversion, in which one then comes to see that one is part of a greater whole.

23. The original name of Pieper’s book that was translated into English as *The Silence of St. Thomas* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine Press, 1999) is *Unaustrinkbares Licht*, i.e., “inexhaustible light”: *Unaustrinkbares Licht: das negative Element in der Weltansicht des Thomas von Aquin* (Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1963).

response. Once given, the students look to the teacher to see if it was right, and if it is not there ensues another painful silence as they wait for someone else to give it a shot. If it is correct, they then wait for the next question. If the teacher tries to stir up some discussion by insisting there is no single right answer, then this is taken to mean that the discussion is not about anything real after all, but only a matter of individuals sharing “their own perspectives,” subjective impressions, or personal experiences. This leads some of the serious students to become even more frustrated with the time being wasted, but it nevertheless often does encourage more participation. The problem, however, is that no amount of participation, however lively, however intelligent or original, can give rise to a real conversation without a turning together toward the reality that unites us all. What one gets, instead, is the serial presentation of perspectives or impressions, each of which is typically directed principally to the teacher rather than to the class as a whole. This is revealing insofar as it suggests the assumption that the principle of unity around which the conversation turns does not lie in being—which transcends us all, even the experts—but in the *knower*, the clearest representative of which in this case happens to be the teacher.

Note, this description of a contemporary seminar is not intended as a reproach to students: the problem is not a failure of will in any individual or individuals; it is more radically an impoverishment of our sense of truth and the subsequent crisis of reason and fragmentation of the university. What is called a “seminar discussion” will necessarily take this form, regardless of the sincerity, earnestness, and good will of all of the participants to the extent that, to borrow from T.S. Eliot, we reduce wisdom to knowledge and knowledge to information. In this case, there is nothing worth talking about in any object, and the only thing lying beyond objects is the subject, which is one might say interesting only in a subjective sense. There can be no conversion here, no transformation, no elevation to genuine insight into reality. With an *ontological* sense of truth, a recognition of *every* object as a revelation of what is more than itself and what remains more regardless of how much is revealed, there is no end to what can be said of even the simplest thing. Seen as true, reality manifests a depth the exploration of which has no end in principle.

The quality of one's experience in the classroom can thus be an indication of the state of the university. The crisis of fragmentation is in fact not merely what is typically called an "academic" problem, that is, an issue of merely theoretical interest without practical consequences. It is indeed theoretical in the classical sense of the term, that is, it concerns the meaning of reality as it is in itself. But precisely because it is theoretical in this sense it has profound and extensive implications for the way we live and the way we experience life. In this sense, the problem of the "universality of the university" quite clearly overflows the boundaries of the university. As we suggested at the outset, the state of the university is a symptom of the state of the culture more generally. If the incapacity for conversation is experienced in a particularly direct and painful way in the contemporary seminar room, we ought to recognize how much we as a culture have in general lost the ability to hold genuine conversations. The suggestion is that this loss is due to the loss of a sense of what Gabriel Marcel called the ontological mystery,<sup>24</sup> and that what is at stake here is more than simply the continued existence of universities, but more fundamentally our understanding of what it means to be a human being: in a word, what is at stake is the meaning of life.

##### 5. CONCLUSION: KNOWING IN COMMUNITY

Having sketched out aspects of a response to the crisis of reason that takes its inspiration from *Fides et ratio's* privileging of a philosophy of being, let us in conclusion compare this response briefly with the approach that Marion offers in his lecture on the universality of the university. It is clear that much of what is said in the two responses is not opposed, but complementary. Marion's diagnosis of the crisis is illuminating, and he is certainly right to indicate the ways in which specialization itself, in spite of its practical focus, is ultimately about truth. He is also right that the human person lies in some respect at the center of the university, specifically as knower and more basically as lov-

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24. See Gabriel Marcel, "On the Ontological Mystery," in *The Philosophy of Existentialism* (New York: Kensington Books, 2002), 9–46.

er. The two approaches share in common an attempt to recover the universality of the university by discovering a principle of unity both beyond the particular objects of knowledge and beyond the knowing subject. I have suggested that this principle is the truth of being; Marion, by contrast, locates this principle in what we do not know, and, indeed, what cannot be known in a final and definitive way (the self and the infinite, i.e., God). There is no room in the present context for an examination of Marion's famous thesis regarding God "without being" and the implications of his relentless rejection of metaphysics, though we ought to see that these are the sorts of questions that are raised by the position he presents in his lecture on the university. Instead, we will have to content ourselves here, in light of our last section, simply with the question: what sort of conversation would his position generate?

If a thing cannot be known, it of course cannot be talked about. It follows from Marion's position that we are unable to converse about that which unites us. To be sure, Marion insists that, while the self and God can never be objects of knowledge, and thus can never be realities about which we learn, we nevertheless can, and indeed *ought*, to learn how and why they are incomprehensible. In this respect, we would at least be able to talk about this how and why, and presumably be united in this conversation. But it seems to me the inadequacy of the position comes to light when we recognize that this would necessarily be a rather short conversation, and indeed one that need only happen once (or perhaps twice: once about the self and once about God). In the first place, talking about what you can't talk about cannot be an *intrinsically* interesting conversation, because it does not present something positive to provoke wonder. The interest, rather, is entirely negative. But more fundamentally, if it is the case that we are united *specifically* by what transcends knowledge, and indeed knowability simply, it means that precisely to the extent that we have made something known, it ceases to transcend us, and we fall back into ourselves, so to speak, as individual knowers. If it is true that, as Marion claims, there is no transcendent principle of unity "in the diversity of things known" or in any object of knowledge, then there can be no conversation, in the sense we have described above, about any particular things, any objects of study, any of the diverse

things we know. In these matters, we have only the registration of data. Conversation is possible only regarding “the insurmountable limits of finitude,” as Marion puts it, which means only about the restrictions on our knowledge of the self and of God. But what follows from this relegation of knowledge to objects without ontological depth is that, once these limits are known, there is nothing more to be said about them. What we certainly do not have is a community of knowers in the truth that is known: we do not, in other words, have a university.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, to anticipate an objection: one might respond that the conversation about our insurmountable finitude need never come to an end because the unknowable in relation to which we are limited is infinite, and we are moreover constantly tempted to forget the limits of our finitude. True enough. But is it really the unknowable specifically unknowable that keeps wonder and inquiry open?<sup>26</sup> Plato observed in the *Meno* that, while it is not possible of course to seek out something one already has in one’s complete possession, it is likewise impossible to search for something that is absolutely absent, because one would not know what to look for (nor indeed why to look for it). In the *Phaedo*, he gives the name “misology,” contempt for reason, to the despair that resigns itself to never being able to discover truth. If something is taken to be incomprehensible simply, why invest any time trying to know it? This question implies a shutting down rather than an opening up. What is needed instead for openness, it seems, is *hope*, which depends in some respect on the positive presence of what is hoped for; an openness to what lies beyond one requires *in some sense* real knowledge. If that knowledge is nothing more than the registration of flat and

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25. Note, when Marion talks about recovering *universality* in the university, he explains that this consists in “above all [teaching] the learner his power and his finitude—[opening] up his mind to his *intellectus* itself.” If this means that I as a knower am simply being opened up to the mystery of my own mind, rather than also to a reality that I can genuinely know as transcending me, it represents at best *universality for me* as an individual that Marion is recovering here. This universality is not the *catholicity* that I have been arguing for in this essay.

26. The point being made in this paragraph is given a much more thorough argument, from a variety of angles and in a variety of different contexts, in my forthcoming book *The Catholicity of Reason*, which is being published by Eerdmans.

inert “facts,” the complete appropriation of the object of knowledge, then it would make no sense to speak of hoping for, of being open to, what one “already knows.” But if by contrast knowledge is a participation in truth, and truth is understood transcendently, as being itself in its ordination to the intellect, then every “already knowing” remains a “not yet knowing.” The truth that animates the university because it brings unity to it, making it catholic in the community of knowers who partake in the conversation of the many disciplines, is an inexhaustible mystery, not because it is an impenetrable darkness, but because it is superabundant light. □

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