# THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE UNIVERSITY

Jean-Luc Marion

"The desire to know already presupposes the love of the still unknown truth."

It does not go without saying that it is necessary to study, or to advise a young mind to study at a university. Why not give preference to a *grande école*,[1] a professional institute, or another alternative formation? Or why pursue any other training upon completing secondary school, more than on-the-job training, in the field, "in production," as they used to say in the post-war years? These questions would not arise if we did not very readily, very naturally compare such institutions to the university; but this inclination to make comparisons results from the fact that we no longer have a clear idea of the university in its most distinctive essence. Besides, in French we speak more often about "higher education" than about "the university," a form of instruction that in fact nowadays constitutes only one aspect thereof: the *grandes écoles*, which are often national and obviously claim to be establishments of higher learning—these clusters of institutes that

1. An institution of higher learning outside the framework of the French university system.—Translator

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have been reorganized to compete with major American institutions, etc., recover [*recouvrent*], in all the senses of the word (i.e. "retrieve, recuperate" from the verb *recouvrer*; but also "cover up, mask" from *recouvrir*), the very term "university." There is an excuse for this confusion. It results in fact from a long development that was definitively sanctioned from the French Revolution onward: the trend of replacing the universities with professional schools, and then the transformation of the university itself into a professional school. This French example has made disciples [*a fait école*], so to speak, throughout the world. But professionalization obviously presupposes specialization, which leads to the renunciation of universality—at least understood as the knowledge *de omni re scibili* [of everything knowable]. Should we therefore renounce the very idea of the university, if we must renounce the ambition to attain universality? And, if we do renounce it, and if we must be satisfied with specialized higher education, then what truly higher substance will remain in that education?

But the distinction between the universality of the university and the specialization of the professional school could very well disguise the difficulty, which does not consist solely, nor perhaps initially, in noting their opposition. Criticizing specialization, moreover, while easy, might just be futile, and for the moment we will refrain from merely scoffing at the character who is called in German a *fachidiot*, a specialist-idiot. The specialty (*species, eidos*) takes up again, though sometimes unwittingly, the definition of science by Aristotle, who says that there is no science but that of the *genus*, in the field of those existing things that are dependent on common essential characteristics, on a kind of being. For a long time this defined the domain of each discipline. The disciplinary interpretation of kinds of knowledge comes straight from Aristotle and prolongs his doctrine in our educational establishments. Now, upon completing secondary schooling, a student has not yet mastered the *genus* (at best he has accumulated some pre-formed knowledge that has been somewhat simplified so as to allow for rapid assimilation and is therefore indirect); he has mastery of only a few intellectual operations that he does not yet really understand fundamentally, or that he understands only in their implications. He has yet to understand what he knows, to understand why what he knows is true. This means that he at least has yet to know thor-

oughly the little that he knows. In doing this, in ascending from the knowledge of certain partial, summary results of a science to an understanding of the principles that justify them, the student can have an initial, decisive experience: the experience of learning the difference between knowing and not knowing, between knowing well and knowing badly. He experiences, at least in a few particular cases, the actual accomplishment of knowing; he senses the joy and the fun of truly knowing what he knows, as limited as that may be. Thus the "arts and crafts" are even with the sciences: a craft is something one can come to feel that one has completely mastered, or at least one hopes to, and this feeling is not necessarily an illusion. Making wine is more valuable than knowing enology, which remains a vague branch of chemistry. Making something out of wood, working at a piece of cabinetry, raising a wall, machining a gear, wiring a complex electronic network, etc., are activities that give us an experience of things, they cause us to respect their logic and to test our talent. Making a career out of a trade allows someone not only to make a living, to acquire the wherewithal to live independently (relatively and provisionally speaking, of course), but above all to have a trade, to practice an art, to master a specific know-how. In short, if not to achieve mastery of a science, then at least to achieve mastery of a type of problem, to know what one is talking about, to get results, to acquire a skill—to become an expert in one's field. If professionalization and specialization thus allowed an individual truly to know a *genus* of reality, then they would offer much more than simple professional qualifications: they would provide access to the experience of truth in action.

Understood in this way, specialization and professionalization become twofold. In the best case, they lead to two distinct results. First, as we said, they teach a trade. Then they train the student in the autonomy of the act of knowing, which is the true basis of (relative) professional, social, and personal independence. Mastery of a field [*fonds*] creates self-esteem, because it counts in and of itself—and allows the one who works in it to count on himself. Thus one can not only count on oneself, have gainful employment, because one holds down a job that is recognized in the arena of society, but above all one can know the difference between knowing and not knowing. Hence the discovery, which is moral and already political, that authority has its foundation, its

justification, and its claim to acceptance only on the basis of the mastered field, of competence in a verifiable area, in short, on the basis of the validity of the very thing that is done and well done.

Here the difference or at least the differentiation between true and false knowledge comes to the fore—in other words, another political consequence: the separation of science and ideology. Being able to recognize false knowledge, to denounce ideology (even the ideology of the "financialization" of the economy) is indeed one of the bases of democratic life.

A danger, however, goes hand in hand with this result. For the situation can become, indeed it is becoming before our eyes, the one described in the famous definition of a business that is made up of [1] those who know everything about only one thing (and whose praises we have just sung: those who have a job and actually know what they know): the employees; [2] the one who knows nothing about anything and claims to know it all about everything: the manager; and finally [3] those who know a few little things about everything: the secretaries. This leaves [4] the one who knows a little in one field that cannot really be defined as a *genus*: the specialist in an *ad hoc* specialty, the one who does "consulting," "forecasting," "organization." Indeed, people keep saying that most jobs that will be done ten years from now do not yet exist today; let us add the converse therefore: most of the jobs being done today will no longer exist in ten years, or less. From this we must draw the conclusion that it is also becoming almost impossible to train definitively for a specialty, because no specialty will last a lifetime or even the number of years it takes for an education or an apprenticeship. The teacher must resign himself to learning, at best, only slightly in advance of those who are taught. Continuing education therefore operates more as a threat than as an opportunity, and it burdens the instructors even more than the instructed. In the limiting case, therefore, the only thing taught is what is already no longer current. The hierarchy of training programs depends on the up-to-date character of employment opportunities and thus on the publicity for some of the professions supposedly in the future. There is a crisis in the labor market not only because there are no longer enough jobs, but also and especially because there is a lack of jobs that are lasting, teachable, and practicable in the full sense. If it is necessary to know how to change your line of work several times

during your professional career, we must conclude that there are no longer any lines of work, and that a man's life can no longer be identified with his profession or his function as a producer.

Thus the purpose of so-called higher education, which is in fact professional education through specialization, ends up being the accumulation of various kinds of information, all of them provisional and urgent, solely because their shelf life is growing shorter. "Actuality," what is of current interest, thus confirms that it is defined by exclusive attention to what does not last, and therefore to what is unreal. If information must be understood as data that evaporates the moment it is acquired, then higher education that is enlisted in the diffusion of this current information has no future, because it does not even have a true present. It is necessary therefore to consider another model of higher education that proposes a contrary hypothesis of a universal knowledge.

Some establishments, for example the liberal arts college in the United States, claim to do this. It is a matter of educating the gentleman, whom we used to call "*l'honnête homme*" in France a few centuries ago. To educate and not just to teach; in other words, not to educate by teaching a body of knowledge (this is what the *Éducation Nationale* in France still believes, which unceasingly demonstrates that by teaching—and in a mediocre way to boot, since it ends up abandoning the very concept of knowledge—on the contrary it does not educate at all), but rather through the knowledge imparted to educate by teaching the individual who will learn it, but who cannot be reduced to it and who possibly will never pursue a career. Here we find again the old contrast between the liberal arts, which serve no purpose except themselves, and the servile arts, which serve another end and a different liberty. This is not just about the distinction between servile or alienated work, which serves only to keep alive the one who performs it, and free work, which is an end unto itself. It is about the distinction sketched by St. Augustine between *uti* [to use] and *frui* [to enjoy]. *Uti* supposes that one works at a thing for some other purpose than the thing itself. *Frui* implies enjoying the thing itself and for its own sake, without assigning it to an external end, in other words, experiencing the end, the accomplishment, absolutely.

Education for (and by means of) universal science therefore has a clear ethical justification: to attain an end, which ul-

timately comes down to the human being himself who does the work, and not a finality that is external to that work. Marx, in establishing the distinction between alienated work and free work, rediscovered St. Augustine. It is therefore advisable to educate man for his well-being, for the good itself and for nothing else—for his own good and for that of others, instead of just teaching him information about what does not concern him directly, the things of the world, or objects of ambient unreality. Only in this way can one hope to escape from the sadness of the individual who knows everything except himself—the sorrow of Faust who learned everything but at the end of his life knows nothing about himself or about his destiny. The Faust of modern times appears when the salaried employee, who dreamed for his whole life as an alienated producer about "free time," suddenly experiences the horror of retirement: for in it he does not finally encounter the enjoyment of self, but rather the suspension of universal diversion; he encounters in it the absence of encounters, evidence that he has no evidence about himself—and incidentally very little about the things that are not himself. Where can he find, then, the place of the self? How can he even think of finding it in anything—the things of the world, all the objects that we produce in order to cover up the natural world—but in the self itself, of which, by the way, he no longer has any concept? The teaching of things serves only to mask the impossibility of guiding (in other words educating) an individual to himself.

Besides this moral justification for a return to universality, there is a theoretical justification of universal knowledge. Let us read Descartes, in the first few *Rules for the Direction of the Mind in Search of Truth*:

> For as the sciences all together are nothing but the human intelligence, which always remains one and the same, no matter what be the variety of the subjects to which it applies itself, inasmuch as this variety changes its nature no more than the diversity of objects upon which it shines changes the nature of the sun, there is no need of confining the human mind within any limit. Indeed, it is not the same with the knowledge of a truth and the practice of an art; one truth discovered, far from being a hindrance to us, aids us in discovering another. And certainly it seems to me surprising that the greater part of men study with diligence plants and their virtues, the courses of the stars, the

> transformations of metals, and a thousand similar objects, while hardly anyone occupies himself with intelligence or this universal science of which we are speaking; and yet, if other studies have any value, it is less on their own account than for the aid which they afford to this.[2]

Here we can identify two theses. First, the thesis of the unity of science, which is more unified by its operator (*sapientia humana*) than it is diversified by the substrates (*subjecta, hypokeimena*) that are studied: not only is science not limited to certain *genera* the more it diversifies, but in fact it progresses only by passing from one *genus* to another, relativizing the ontological definition of things by the one method, that of *mathesis universalis*, universal science proceeding by models and parameters (*ordo et mensura*).

Next, the thesis of the primacy of self-knowledge, of the self only in its capacity as knower: *sapientia humana* [human wisdom] thus becomes *universalis sapientia* [universal wisdom], universal inasmuch as it is knowledge and knowing itself only to the extent that it knows something other than itself. "Now no more useful inquiry can be proposed than that which seeks to determine the nature and the scope of human knowledge" (Rule VIII). The *ego* that exercises its cognitive faculty does not necessarily know itself, neither inasmuch as it knows, nor inasmuch as it might be more than or something other than a pure knowing mind. This describes our situation rather well.

It would therefore be a matter of educating by teaching the universal science. Thus the *universitas rerum* [totality of things] would justify the reunion of all the faculties (the liberal arts and the three higher faculties: theology, law, and medicine) so as to attain the union of the sciences in *universalis humana sapientia* [universal human wisdom]. The term *universitas* [university] at first designated the corporation of the learned, the *universitas magistrorum et scolarium*, the community of masters and students (scholars), only to become very quickly the name of the instrument of universality, of the universality of the one *sapientia humana universalis* in many minds. Let us therefore not dismiss too quickly this great ambition by supposing that it aims at nothing

2. Rene Descartes, "Rules for the Direction of the Mind," in *The Philosophy of Descartes: In Extracts from His Writings*, selected and trans. by Henry A. P. Torrey (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1892), 61-62.

less than constructing a complete system of the sciences (as in the *encyclopédie* or the works of Condorcet), or even at an absolute knowledge for a consciousness that is itself absolute (Hegel), or else to devise a doctrine of the unification of the sciences (in the neo-positivism of Carnap). It may be a question (and this was Descartes' purpose) of pondering, modestly, so to speak, the primacy of the unique, unified enterprise of knowing over the diversity of things known. To put it differently, it may be a question of the ambition to educate, by way of teaching subjects and sciences, the minds themselves, inasmuch as they know, and experience themselves in their capacity as knowers, even though strictly speaking they do not yet know themselves. Therefore it is a question of teaching first how to learn. Of course this means teaching what can be learned, the already-established sciences and the one human wisdom that constitutes them, but also and above all teaching what cannot be learned and cannot be known as an object of science—namely the individual who learns and knows, therefore, the knowledge of the insurmountable limits of his finitude, and therefore finally the knowledge of incomprehensible infinity—which some will identify as respect and love for God. To educate basically signifies to teach what can be learned, but above all to teach the learner his power and his finitude—to open up his mind to his *intellectus* itself.

This leads to the discovery of certain rules for such a system of education unto oneself (*ego cogitans*, the thinking I) by teaching that which is not oneself (the sciences in the *mathesis universalis*). These are the rules of the university.

First, teaching to learn what one does not know: not to claim to know everything, but to know also what we do not know and can never know, and to know why we can never know it. It is necessary to be educated also in how to manage our ignorance. Students: when you enter the university, you will learn many things, but nothing so decisive as the immensity of what you will not know and what your instructors also do not know. You will have the leisure to experience this ignorance only for a time, paradoxically the time of your studies. You will discover that the books that we shall not read are as important as the ones that we shall have read, provided that we know their titles, have some inkling of their greatness, and sense their presence around us. The library, above all, contains some books whose very exis-

tence we know nothing of, and others that we will leaf through without having the time or the courage to read them, but knowing that from now on they are with us. Once the years of your university studies are past, you will know, at least you ought to know or to act as though you knew; society will forcibly transform you into subjects who are supposed to know, and you will no longer have the freedom to learn, nor the liberty to know what you will never know.

Then, at the university, you will have an experience of truth, which is sometimes attained but often missed. Nowhere except at the university can one in fact experience this, since everywhere else you have neither the time nor the courage nor, above all, the permission to do so. Elsewhere, in business and in managing things, you gather information, you putter around, you disguise things, you hurry, you work, and you make deals. Only at the university do you measure what you know and what you do not know, for there one enjoys the freedom to think outside of the box, outside of the eddies and currents of "life" (so called ironically), outside of "actuality" (once again I call "actuality" that which is no longer of interest tomorrow). Indeed, the university opens up that strange land where one does not lie, as the German teacher of the future Cardinal Lustiger used to say to his pupils in the sixth form: "Gentlemen, here we do not lie." Plagiarism and cheating are unpardonable sins at the university, unpardonable because anyone who commits them proves in fact that he never entered into the logic of the university. There is not even any need to expel him, since he never entered and does not belong there. Moreover this is true for the professors as much as it is for the students. For the only difference between the professor and the students, Heidegger said, pertains to the fact that the professor works much more than his students.

And again, one finds at the university an ethics of evidence, because evidence here ultimately consists only of a decision: when can I and must I reject, for reasons that are themselves evident, an appearance of likelihood [*une apparence d'apparence*], namely, an evidence that perhaps is not one after all? When, on the contrary, must I renounce doubt and yield to the evidence? This decision alone permits me to ratify morally some bit of knowledge, or, by rejecting what everyone takes for granted, to open up the field of a new question, or of a new hypothesis,

and therefore the possibility of a more powerful theory. There is a decision in favor of truth, or a decision that makes the truth, but also a decision that hates and rejects the truth. Who decides? Not the evidence, since that depends on it [i.e., on the decision]. Therefore another authority, the love of truth (or the hatred thereof). The highest Christian virtue, Pascal said at one point, is the love of truth.

Finally, we must understand that every body of knowledge [*savoir*] has its limits, and that no science may usurp the role of the others (neither physics nor chemistry nor economics nor any of the social sciences and humanities can claim to have the role or the rank of the ultimate science, in other words, of first philosophy). Moreover, scientific usurpations—which lead to idolatries of knowledge and then to ideologies (the supreme form of imperialism in the field of knowledge)—are the worst sorts of anthropomorphism: for example, thinking that God always geometrizes, or that chance makes the world by means of universal calculus. An awareness of the conditions under which it is possible defines simultaneously a science and its limits. These are a few of the ethical rules that allow a university to merit its name and to respect its essence.

But there is more, for man (the student as well as the professor) is not summed up in his intellect any more than he lives by bread alone. We learn, but why do we learn? At best, for love of wisdom: "All men by nature desire to know," according to Aristotle. Certainly, but whence springs this desire? Animals do not *desire* to know, nor to know more and more and increasingly well, because they know what they desire, without desiring knowledge for its own sake. An animal knows within the limits of its desire and desires within the limits of what it knows, whereas man knows according to the measure of his limitless desire, and therefore desires what he does *not* know. To man belongs the privilege of asking questions without immediate answers. At first this initial question: who can speak wisdom, who can define it so as to aim at it? Who even dares to aim at it? No one, or almost nobody in any of our societies still publicly claims to do so. Hence this second question: Therefore, in order to aim at it, one must love it without yet knowing it. But who seriously desires wisdom? The desire to know already presupposes the love of the still unknown truth. But do we really love the truth? St.

Augustine describes better than anyone the difficulty of such a love of unknown wisdom:

> But why doth "truth generate hatred," and the man of thine, preaching the truth, become an enemy to them? Whereas a happy life is loved, which is nothing else but joying in the truth; unless that truth is in that kind loved, that they who love any thing else would gladly have that which they love to be the truth: and because they would not be deceived, would not be convinced that they are so? Therefore do they hate the truth for that thing's sake which they love instead of the truth. They love truth when she enlightens, they hate her when she reproves.[3]

Wisdom implies love of wisdom, which in turn depends on the law of love. One knows only inasmuch as one accepts that which offers itself to be known. For to deny it, as people deny evidence, always remains possible.

That is why no authentic university can dispense with theology. If there is no knowledge, and therefore no teaching or education without love of the truth, then none of these exist either without a science of love. Hence the essential role of theology, which in this sense at least is queen of the sciences. The universality of the university requires that theology have its own faculty there. This is not optional. Newman framed the argument:

> If there be a science anywhere, which at least could claim not to be ignored, but to be entertained, and either distinctly accepted or distinctly reprobated, or rather, which cannot be passed over in a scheme of universal instruction, without involving a positive denial of its truth, it is this ancient, this far-spreading philosophy.[4]

American universities remind us of this: whatever title it is known by (Divinity School, Department of Religion, Faculty of Religious Studies, etc.), theology constitutes the center of every university. And when, as in the public universities of

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3. *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. by E. B. Pusey, edited by Temple Scott (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1900), 256.

4. John Henry Cardinal Newman, *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co.: 1899), Discourse III.9, pages 68–69.

France, they claim to condemn it, it lays siege, "by the necessity of truth" (Aristotle) and in forms that are sometimes savage or perverted, to the other faculties and departments.—*Translated by Michael J. Miller.* □

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