

## THE MORAL PURPOSES OF THE UNIVERSITY: AN EXCHANGE

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*In Spring 2000 George Marsden and Julie Reuben gave previous versions of the papers included in this issue of The Hedgehog Review at a colloquium on the moral purposes of the university, sponsored by the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. Printed here are the formal remarks that Richard Rorty gave in response to their papers, followed by brief comments from Professor Marsden and Professor Reuben.*

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### *Richard Rorty*

In his paper, Professor Marsden says: “Among the candidates for being constructive subtraditions in American society, the religious communities ought to rank high on anybody’s list. Of course, we all like some religious communities better than others, or might think of some we might not want to encourage, but the vast majority seem among the best candidates to help produce constructive citizens.” I disagree almost entirely with that claim. I think that only a tiny minority of American religious communities ought to rank as constructive subtraditions in American society.

My litmus tests would be the following: If a religious community has gay clergy and solemnizes gay marriages, it belongs to the constructive minority. If it preaches the social gospel, if the preachers remind the

congregation that the richest country in the world at the richest point in its economic history still doesn't feed its poor, then it also qualifies. I don't think there are very many religious communities of this sort. The vast majority of them do not meet either of these litmus tests.

One reason I would give the title of "constructive" only to this small minority is that I am a militant secularist. I think that the Enlightenment was right to suggest that religion is something that the human species would be better if it could outgrow. Diderot suggested that the last king should be strangled with the entrails of the last priest. Bentham and Mr. Jefferson founded secular universities because they had developed a justified distrust of the churches. Later on, Marx described religion as the opiate of the people. Even though some of my best friends are priests, I feel some sympathy with all these critics of religious institutions.

As I see it, the religious idea of post-mortem rewards and punishments has, just as Marx said, functioned to decrease the libidinal energy available for reform here below—for the attempt to create heaven on earth. To be sure, various Christian and other religious groups have occasionally done a lot to decrease human suffering. The black churches in the Civil Rights movement and the social gospel churches in the great days of the Progressive Era are conspicuous examples. But these efforts strike me as relatively insignificant by comparison with the reactionary tendencies of most of the churches. Because the churches have failed to do much to relieve unnecessary human suffering, and have indeed greatly increased it, I find the rise of church attendance in the United States depressing. This rise makes me fear for the republic. If it continues, if more and more people seek solace in the world beyond, I fear that there will be less social reform, less pressure for social justice.

Europe seems to me safer than the U.S. from the threat of fascism that will accompany a serious collapse in the global economy. One reason for this is the decline in church attendance in Europe, which contrasts very sharply with its rise in the United States. I'm afraid that if the world experiences a second Great Depression, Father Coughlin-like figures may become leaders of right-wing populist revolts against democratic institutions. So I see democracy as safest where church attendance has

been going down. I agree with Senator McCain that Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson are *evil*. They are just the sort of Coughlin-like figures I fear. Yet they are the most politically prominent and efficacious Christian leaders in the U.S. Christianity disgraces itself when it countenances such men. No subtradition that does so can be called “constructive.”

So much for my overall outlook on the role of religion in society. I now want to say something about the history of the American university. I’m very grateful to the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture for giving me an occasion to read Professor Reuben’s *The Making of the Modern University* and Professor Marsden’s *The Soul of the American University*. They are very informative books. I learned an enormous amount from them. I disagree with the overall perspective from which they are written, but I know a lot more about the American university after reading them than I did before.

If I were writing a history of the American university, I would tell an upbeat story about the gradual replacement of the churches by the universities as the conscience of the nation. One of the most important things that happened in the U.S. in the twentieth century was that the universities became the places where movements for the relief of human suffering found privileged sanctuaries and power bases. The universities came to play a social role that they had not played in the nineteenth century. Today the American universities not only form the best system of higher education in the world, but are morally impressive institutions. They are not incoherent, nor are they in crisis. They could, of course, do more for the relief of human suffering than they presently do, but we can look back over a century during which a great deal of the moral progress that America achieved took inspiration and example from the universities.

The moral progress I have in mind began in the Progressive Era, and runs from the various reforms that were made possible by Teddy Roosevelt and by Wilson through the New Deal, the Great Society legislation, the Civil Rights movement, second-wave feminism, and the gay rights movement. In all of these, the universities played a prominent role. Academic social scientists were of enormous value to the Progressives and to the New Deal. Some, though hardly all, of the

churches played a central role in the Civil Rights movement, but an equally central role was played by the colleges and universities.

The churches have not done much for either feminism or gay rights. The universities have done a great deal. Insofar as there is still any ideological pressure for social justice in this country, it finds itself concentrated on the campus, rather than in the churches. One of the nicest things you can say about the American university is that university towns tend to be Democratic islands in Republican oceans. The most depressing thing about the recent behavior of the American university is that the kind of enthusiasm which students once showed for McCarthy and McGovern was not shown for Bradley or McCain. There was no student uprising, so to speak, to abolish the systematic corruption that now makes a mockery of our government. It is as if the students had decided to let American politics pass them by.

I want to turn now to the relation between morality and religion, and to distinguish between three senses of the term "moral." In one sense, this term is used to describe someone relatively decent, trustworthy, and honest—one who gives correct change, keeps promises, doesn't lie much, can usually be relied upon to take an appropriate share in cooperative efforts, and so on. It seems to me if you're not that sort of person by the time you're eighteen, it's probably too late. I don't think that sociopaths who enter the university are corrigible by any measures that the academy might adopt. If the family, the community, the church, and the like, haven't made you a relatively decent member of society, haven't given you a conscience that stops you from cheating the customers, administering date rape drugs, or doing a lot of things we hope our eighteen year olds won't do, the university won't either. The academy can't take on the job of straightening you out, of creating the conscience that the rest of the culture didn't manage to produce during your first eighteen years.

In this first sense of morality, everybody—except for the odd sociopath—has a morality. Even the Nazis. Even the samurai. Even they are honest, responsible, decent, and truth-telling in their behavior toward a certain group of people, those whom they consider their moral equals. They may not consider Jews or blacks or untouchables their moral equals,

however. Almost all of us who were brought up in any kind of coherent society or community—good, bad, or indifferent—acquire a sense of moral obligation to *some* people, the people whom we think of as “like ourselves.”

Moral progress on a world-historical scale consists in enlarging the range of people whom we think of as people like us. Barbarians, for example, get in as well as Greeks. Greeks get in as well as Jews. Women get in as well as men. Blacks get in as well as whites. Gays get in as well as straights. The more featherless bipeds you include in your list of who counts, who matters, the people to whom you have obligations, the more morally advanced you are. I think of Americans as having made great progress in the course of the twentieth century in enlarging their sense of who counts. The Christian churches have not made nearly as much of a contribution to this process of moral improvement as Mr. Jefferson hoped they might.

There is, however, another sense of “moral.” People who use the word in this second sense think of certain sexual behavior as the paradigm case of immorality. They think of possession of a good moral character as manifested in not fornicating, masturbating, committing sodomy, committing adultery, and the like. I hope that “moral” will eventually cease to be employed in this sense. People should not think sex that important, and should not base judgments of the worth of their fellow human beings on what they do or don’t do in bed. The churches have been largely responsible for keeping sex prominent in discussions of morality. It is hard to forgive them for this.

Finally there is a third sense of “moral,” one which can be explicated by reference to the utilitarian principle. Utilitarians like myself think that morality is the attempt to decrease the amount of suffering among human beings. This attempt has very little to do with sex, but a great deal to do with money. Most of the suffering in the world is caused by the rich taking money away from the poor. Occasionally the churches have joined in the effort to get the rich to give some of the money back to the poor. More often, they have not. So, I’m inclined to think that in this last, and to my mind, most important sense of morality, the secular culture has done a lot more than the churches have for morality.

I agree with Professor Marsden's point that pragmatism borrows a lot of moral capital from religion. The Enlightenment itself borrowed a lot of moral capital from the Christian Scriptures. Because people like Mr. Jefferson were able to quote relevant passages from those scriptures (passages about loving one another, human brotherhood, neither Jew nor Greek, etcetera) the thinkers of the Enlightenment were sometimes able to present themselves as reviving the true spirit of Christ. Still, the Enlightenment was an advance on Christianity because it left otherworldliness behind. It stuck to the portions of the Christian Scriptures that could be applied to actions in this world. When atheists like Voltaire and Marx suggested that we drop hope of extraterrestrial reward, and encourage the peasants and workers to think that things would only become better if they took action on earth, a great step was taken for the diminution of human suffering.

Let me now say something about the universities as sites of moral education. I do not think this is a topic that administrators or faculty senates should be thinking about. As I said before, if the students aren't reasonably honest and decent people by the time they hit the university, I don't see that there is much that we in higher education can do about it. If they're given, despite being honest and decent, to fornication and sodomy, that is none of the university's business.

On the other hand, if the students are uninterested in the quest for social justice, if they're fundamentally selfish and have no interest in the relief of suffering in our society, then perhaps the university *should* be concerned. I wouldn't trust the administration to handle this kind of thing, but maybe the faculty should say to itself: "Hey, we belong to a great moral tradition, the tradition of American progressivism, the tradition of the New Deal, the tradition of the Civil Rights movement. We have been the moral leaders of the nation. We have, at our best, been its conscience. If we're not being its conscience any more, perhaps we're doing something wrong." I don't, however, know what the faculty should say next. Suppose a faculty does reach that conclusion, what does it do? Perhaps nothing as a corporate body, but maybe as individuals the professors could try to slip a few more appeals to pity and charity into their lectures.

Now I'd like to turn to some very interesting remarks of Professor Reuben's on the relation between the true and the good. She said that the history of the university shows that the problem of morality is an epistemological one. I am dubious about this. I don't think that there's anything very interesting to be said about how we justify our moral judgments, nor about what epistemological outlook we should adopt when asking ourselves questions about the right thing to do. As far as I can see, epistemology as a philosophical discipline has been a complete flop. I would hesitate to recommend a further dose of it.

To my way of thinking—and here I put on my philosopher's hat and offer a controversial philosophical view—knowledge is equally objective in all areas, ethics as much as physics and logic. We get moral truth, Dewey rightly said, in exactly the same way that we get scientific truth. Moral truth is more difficult to agree on, more controversial, but it is not subjective as opposed to objective, or relative as opposed to absolute. We experiment with various scientific theories and see which does the best job of combining predictive power, elegance, fruitfulness, and all the rest of it. We experiment with various moral identities, various moral communities, and see which of them does the best job of decreasing human suffering. We learn through experiment that some things we thought might work won't. We learned, for example, that nationalizing the means of production will probably not decrease human suffering. Other experiments taught us that the traditional teaching of the churches about sex is likely to increase human suffering.

These discoveries were not made by subjective introspection of emotional states, nor were they obtained by getting a clearer understanding of the deliverances of what Kant called "pure practical reason." They were made as a result of living through various social experiments and watching the results. We thereby obtained objective moral truths, or at least the best candidates for such truth so far available. Science and morality are on an epistemological par. They offer precisely the same kinds of knowledge, attained in precisely the same ways. That is why I don't think there's much to be said about the epistemology of morality.

Professor Reuben gives a very interesting account of the way in which the religious notion that everything converges—that God, knowledge, and truth are one—got converted by nineteenth-century scientism into the view that everything will come together in unified science. This view remains very popular among scientists. Anyone who has read E. O. Wilson's book, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, will recognize the view that natural science, if given hegemony over the rest of culture, will straighten out morality, the humanities, religion, everything else. That claim is analogous to the one made occasionally by the Catholic Church—that if it were given authority over natural science, the humanities, art, and everything else, it would straighten everything out by bringing it all into conformity with the divine word. E. O. Wilson's claim seems to me as dubious as Pius X's. I don't think there is any hope of either the churches or the natural scientists bringing this sort of order or unification or convergence into existence, nor any need to search for it.

One reason we don't need such unification is suggested by the pragmatist view that, as William James put it, the true is the good in the way of belief. Intellectual activity is a matter of finding the right thing to do, including the right thing to believe. We adopt whatever candidate for action or for belief seems to us at the moment to conduce best to the fulfillment of our various needs—theoretical needs, practical needs, moral needs, aesthetic needs, all kinds of needs. All inquiry is a matter of reweaving our web of beliefs and desires in such a way as to produce satisfactory solutions to our problems. When we have such a solution, we say that we have found the right thing to do, or the right proposition to believe.

I suspect that there is nothing much more to be said about the relation between truth and goodness, or between fact and value. The separation of fact and value was indeed, as Professor Reuben says, a big deal for the logical positivists, as it was in nineteenth-century scientism. But discussion of that separation is a philosophical dead end. The only core of truth in the notion that there's a difference between fact or value, or a difference between the is and the ought, is that, *pace* E. O. Wilson, it is one thing to find out how things work and another thing to find out what you ought to do with them. It's one thing to find out how you make the rockets go up, and another thing to decide where they ought

to come down. It's one thing to decide how human beings were created by evolutionary processes; it's another thing to figure out what a product of those processes ought to do with herself.

On this point, then, I agree with Professor Reuben: I don't think natural science is ever going to be of any great help in morals, in giving us a more satisfactory human self-image. All natural science will ever do is tell us how various mechanisms—human and otherwise—work. What we should do with these machines will remain a separate question. In that sense, I don't think facts and value will ever be reunited, but I don't think there is any need for such reunification. Unlike Professor Reuben, I don't think that we should try to regain something like the unity of truth or the unity of knowledge—the sort of thing that was believed to exist both by the Protestant establishment of 1840 Harvard and by the scientific establishment of 1910 Harvard, the Harvard of Charles Eliot. I don't see that it matters whether or not our truths form a nice coherent package. All we need to do is figure out what biological beliefs to have, what political beliefs to have, what moral beliefs to have, what (if any) religious beliefs to have, and so on. Putting them together into an organic whole doesn't seem to me an urgent task.

The coherence of an individual human life, however, does matter. We do want centers for our lives. Some of us get such centering from theistic belief. But William James and John Dewey, my intellectual heroes, thought that you could separate theistic belief from ecclesiastical institutions. Dewey, in his *A Common Faith*, distinguished between the religious and religions. He praised the former and didn't much like the latter. James, in his essay "The Will to Believe," said that when intellectual grounds fail us, our emotions are entitled to take over and determine our belief. I would rephrase that as: when it is a matter about which there is no public justificatory procedure for settling belief, we're entitled to make up our minds for ourselves. James thought we all had the right to be theists or to be atheists, but he rather hoped that we would exercise the former right at home and not in church. He liked his father's kind of religion, which was a completely idiosyncratic home-baked product—a little Emerson, a little Swedenborg, a little of this, a little of that. James thought that if we are going to acquire a religious belief, this individualistic eclecticism was the best way to go about it.

So my militantly secularist attitude toward the institution of the university and indeed the institutions of American society generally does not presuppose the truth of atheism. Anti-clericalism and atheism are not the same thing. I hold to both, but my atheism does not dictate my anti-clericalism, nor influence my views on public policy. James' theism did not prevent him from holding views on public policy which were pretty much the same as mine.

I shall conclude by saying a little about institutional arrangements for the presence or absence of religion within American universities. In his book, and particularly in its postscript, Professor Marsden points out that there's a tension between religious and secular universities. You often find inhabitants of the latter saying: "Hey, Notre Dame isn't a real university; it's under the thumb of the Vatican." Or: "Brigham Young isn't a real university because it's run by the General Authorities of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints." Professor Marsden has a good point when he protests against this kind of downgrading. It seems to me that a pluralistic democracy should have room for religious institutions like Notre Dame and Brigham Young. These institutions increase the rich diversity of American life.

On the other hand, I think that there are certain things such institutions must do to earn the moral prestige that they get from calling themselves "universities." For example, they can admit students and faculty on the basis of religious belief, but they can't fire them or expel them on the basis of loss of religious belief. They're stuck with them. That is, if you hire a devout Catholic to teach biology or philosophy or something, and he loses his faith after getting tenure, that's tough. Academic freedom prevails. He stays. If a student, admitted because she is a devout Mormon, loses her faith in sophomore year, she gets to continue on at Brigham Young anyway. I haven't got any high-powered principle to justify this claim that you can use religion as a criterion for admission but not for dumping people, but it seems to me as decent a compromise as, for example, "you can have an abortion in the first three months but not at six months." That's an unprincipled pragmatic compromise too. I don't see that we are ever going to have anything better in these areas than such compromises.

Professor Marsden claims that a considerable stigma attaches to the idea of Christian scholarship, and he may be right about this. I just wish he'd provided more horror stories as evidence. In my own discipline, I don't see that such stigmatization occurs. There's an organization called the Society of Christian Philosophers, whose members include some of the biggest names in the philosophy business: MacIntyre, Plantinga, McMullin, Adams, and so on. We atheists, of course, think they're sort of weird, just as we reformist liberals think the Society for Marxist Philosophy is sort of weird. But "stigma" doesn't seem to me the right term. These Christians' books are read, discussed, awarded prizes, and all the rest of it. I don't see that, within the discipline of philosophy, there are many horror stories to be told. But perhaps—and Professor Marsden knows more about this than I do—in other disciplines there is exclusion and stigmatization of the sort we don't seem to have in philosophy.

### *Julie Reuben Replies*

I wish I could believe everything you've said. I would like to see the university in that way, but I don't think that it's a very accurate portrayal of the university. The idea that the university has been the moral conscience of the nation historically—historically that is just not very true, particularly if what we're largely judging as good is the promotion of progressive politics. We could bracket whether that's going to be what we judge as good, but traditionally universities have been quite conservative places, not very supportive of progressive politics, very supportive of conventional power structures, punitive to faculty who step too far outside of the conventional and support social arrangements that are not very conventional.

There were various early polls of political views of students and faculty. Most people would see the university, its faculty, and its students as, up until the sixties, more conservative than the rest of the nation, rather than the leaders of social justice. Now, it is true that the university in its recent history has become more associated with social justice, but I don't think that it is a simple relationship. In fact, that association has generated a lot of critique of the university to which the university and

its faculty have not been very well able to articulate a defense. They have in fact opened themselves up to the kind of claim that Professor Marsden makes, which is: if you have represented on your faculty feminists and Afro-centrics, then you should also have fundamentalists. They haven't really been able to articulate what the connections are between the scholarship they engage in and the political positions that they take. I think this is really the core of our difference.

I don't actually see myself as a person who is trying to recreate the unity. I hope that I made clear at the end of my paper that I don't think a kind of consensus is possible. Professor Rorty said that he recognizes that it's one thing to find out how humans work and another thing to know what to do with that knowledge, but that he isn't particularly bothered with that second step. Whereas he doesn't think it's a particularly difficult concern or a problem for the university, I do. I think that in the university we don't know how to make that second step. We make that second step as individuals, but we do not reflect on, talk about, or figure out how to evaluate different ways of making that second step. And therefore, I think, we do fall back on the idea that it's all personal choice. I don't think that morality should be seen as purely subjective, but I think that that's the message we send to our students because we don't have any way of articulating how you answer that second set of questions: What do you do with this knowledge? What does it mean? How do you make judgments about what the target of those bombs or rockets that we figured out how to put up should be? And I think that the university has actually encouraged a silence on this second step, but I think that it's part of our responsibility to try to articulate not only our personal positions on those questions about what we do with the knowledge that we've created, but to try to think about a logic of answering that type of question—a way to think about how people come to various answers, how to compare the various answers, how to engage the various answers, and perhaps to push forward the various answers so that they might be improved, not so that we all come to agreement on them, but so that we don't just sit back and say "you think this, I think that," so that we have some way of engaging the process of that second question.

*George Marsden Replies*

I've often commented that the difference between teaching at Calvin College and being in a secular university environment is something like this: People will say, "in order to have really fruitful intellectual life, you have to be open to the widest diversity of opinion." My response to that is that the most vital intellectual community I've been in was at Calvin College, and the reason for this was that when we talked about things, we didn't always have to go back to square one to engage an issue. We could work from square three or four and then argue very vigorously about that. Professor Rorty and I are so far apart on the fundamental issues that it's hard to know how we could possibly talk about them, because on such basic issues we simply judge things differently.

I think that in balance American religion is a good thing for American society and that if, for some reason, all the American religious groups somehow disappeared in the next decade, or there was a tremendous attrition from them, that the society probably would be a good bit worse off all things considered. Suppose you're walking down an urban street, and you see four people who look like thugs walking in the other direction. Would it be any consolation to you to know that they just came out of a prayer meeting? The point being that human nature isn't always directed toward relieving human suffering, that humans create a lot of suffering, and one of the things that organized religions do is inhibit a lot of that kind of creation of human suffering. It's easy to say they could do a lot more, but if you took them out of the picture, the world might be a lot worse off.

Professor Rorty and I could come up with examples and counter examples of why we disagree so fundamentally on that issue, but I'll just take one example that he brought up. One thing that causes an awful lot of human suffering is sexual infidelity, and I don't think it's such a bad thing to have institutions that talk about sexual fidelity. I think it's not a bad thing, because it helps reduce the amount of human suffering. Now, of course, you can always argue about that, but it's not all that obvious that the world would be better off if you simply got rid of institutions that talked about sexual mores or sexual responsibility.

The fundamental issue that it comes down to has a lot to do with our differing views of human nature. I see humans and myself as fundamentally selfish, whereas Professor Rorty talks about that as an exception: if you get students who are fundamentally selfish, then you have a real problem. I think you always get students who are fundamentally selfish. What's the best way to deal with that? Traditional religious faiths try to address that issue and try to generate in people sensibilities that counter that natural selfishness. I think that, on balance, that does the world a good bit of good. If you're very optimistic about human nature and think, "well, we can bring out a natural instinct to relieve human suffering"—I think it's whistling in the dark about the realities of what people are like.