

39. *Case against Academia (1995)*

“Everyone touts the value of a higher education and everyone more or less knows of its advantages. To speak on this side of the matter then would be as banal as recounting the beneficial effects of eating wholesome food or taking exercise. For the most part, it would be best to avoid such tedium no matter what scholarly propriety dictates in the way of showing all sides of an issue. If there is always more than one position to occupy, there is no position secure or definitive. Rather than making a pretence of presenting my position as wholly objective, I therefore would do best to let it honestly reflect my personal involvement. Moreover, the dominant position of the day, precisely by virtue of its being dominant, pays scant attention to the weak challenges to its authority which fall under the rubric of being fair and balanced. To be an effective critic of Christianity or Christendom when all the world proclaims itself Christian requires something more than a moderate tone and taking into account all opposing views. In a similar fashion, the critic of Academia must raise his voice if he is not to be drowned out by the many that sing its praises.

“When Academia speaks of its striving for excellence, it presumably means that it sets out to be more than the mere training ground for various sorts of professions. More than simply a means to accrue wealth and obtain a certain amount of power, prestige, and influence. It presumably means, particularly with respect to the liberal arts, the cultivation and enrichment of the individual. It presumably sets as its task the development of certain talents and capacities in conjunction with personal development as a whole. Even if it only looks upon itself as a kind of finishing school with respect to this task, it certainly does not consider it to be less than important. It is thus the assumption, unspoken or otherwise, that the individual is in all ways *better* for his university education: a stronger, more complete, more centred type of individual. Certainly there is no admission that he might come out weaker, poorer, or anything less than what he was prior to it. Certainly no such admission is forthcoming when the individual does well and excels. And hardly is the notion ever entertained that the highest levels of a university education might increase the likelihood of personal injury, of some deleterious effect. Pronouncements along these lines would no doubt be considered scandalous. Perhaps they would be greeted with the kind of opprobrium at one time reserved for speaking against the Church.

“Yet is it not the case that Academia loudly proclaims itself to be the sanctuary and temple of unrestricted thought? Of thought that is most informed, intelligent, rigorous, and profound? And certainly in most areas and with respect to most matters, it honourably carries out this mission. Certainly the things of the past, no matter how praiseworthy or

accomplished they may be, undergo the most rigorous scrutiny. And certainly no less can be said of many things of the present. Indeed, it would be best to admit that the university even takes a good look at itself from time to time. All this must be granted and yet, as much as a few penetrating looks do not constitute a general practise of self-examination, so the university falls short. So the university does not live up to its self-proclaimed mission of promoting human excellence. For what would be required in order for it to live up to what it seems so earnestly and self-consciously to take itself to be surpasses the periodic and punctual, the always tilting at some formal display and end. In short, what would be required is that it speak the truth about itself as an ongoing discourse that is absolutely integral to it.

“What there must be for such a discourse is a consciousness that dares to proclaim itself. No longer simply carried along as a certain theme of informal talk, as a marginalised area of moral and intellectual dissatisfaction, as sometimes vague but also sometimes painful experiences in the institutional setting, it comes to the point at which it finds the strength and courage to pronounce precisely and at length upon itself. In other words, it becomes a task and a mission.

“One would ask that Academia grow honest. One would ask that it bring to bear the same sort of scrutiny upon itself that it brings to bear upon matters which lie outside it. One would ask that it examine its most minute practises, its most subtle influences, its most hidden sins or insidious vices. One would ask it to ask itself: does it make people more or less honest? And if the answer were that it inculcated subtle forms of dishonesty; if it were, moreover, established that such elements accumulated and grew practised over the years, then Academia, by finally bringing these matters to light, would be more honest and truer to its proclaimed mandate than it has ever been.

“My long practise of comparing and contrasting Academia with the non-academic world has no doubt grown out of my strong attachment to both. At the same time it has produced in me a kind of distance or detachment from both of them, a palpable aversion to being drawn in and wholly claimed by one or the other. If it is always best to be working where one receives the most enjoyment and satisfaction, then the place for me has always been where I experienced the tension and opposition, the free play of thought, imagination, and emotion that springs out of powerfully contending claims and commitments. Fifteen years of continuously failing as a playwright did not rob me of my zest for this manner of living. Security for me has only offered itself along the path of striving to get the best out of myself. When,

in the case of playwrighting, my best proved not to be good enough, I did not on that account lower my aim. I simply came to the realization that, after many long years of hard struggle with pitiful results, it was time to search out some other part of the high heavens.

“So whether it be writing an essay or digging out a foundation, I always took it upon myself to put all of myself into it. With respect to Academia, this way of proceeding largely meant finding ways and means to make the system cater to my likes, tastes, interests, and preferences rather than adjusting my natural bent to it. Throughout all my years of taking undergraduate courses, I succeeded very well, perhaps amazingly well, at this endeavour.

“Loving Academia when it worked for me, I at the same time strongly sensed its inbuilt tendency to take charge of the student. To set his agenda not only formally, openly, and voluntarily, but also dimly, surreptitiously, and even oppressively. Likewise the prevailing consciousness of this institution revealed itself to me not only as an official and more or less unquestioning (because welcome and understood) acceptance of its standards, but also as a deeper if less distinct one that amounted to being enjoined to play a difficult game of currying favour. A game that, in order to be played well, involved a certain amount of selling oneself off without ever failing to look like a pillar of integrity that would serve well in any formal setting.

“Such writers as Emerson and Nietzsche sensed this secretly subversive activity of Academia and proclaimed it inimical to human excellence. They saw that, instead of nurturing the individual with a careful eye to all aspects of personal development, it invariably centred upon the accumulation and ever-more skilful handling of established knowledge. Rather than teaching the way of appropriating the latter and going beyond it, they saw that it for the most part rendered this knowledge a de facto final authority, making it the sun around which all other thoughts revolved and stole their light.

“Ultimately Academia holds up to the student the model of the scholar and not the man or woman of genius. Part of the problem lies in the fact that it blurs the distinction between the two or rather makes it seem as if the second were but the favourable outgrowth of the first. However, the development of highest aims and attributes is not auxiliary to the mastery of some particular subject. Rather it is the coming to be of what must surely be another form of mastery. One that comes from the outside and manages to associate itself with the other and acquire its own authority. Some new vision, theory, etc. that is strong enough to pull into line even the most intransigent of elements.

"Given all this, am I wrong to think that human excellence implies great courage? Am I wrong to think that it implies a discipline that exceeds but certainly doesn't rule out other disciplines? And am I wrong to think that Academia is essentially at odds with this highest of disciplines?"

"How can great courage be fostered within its precincts when, after having diluted the wine of the world's wisdom with the water of worldly pursuits, it fails to admit to itself and to others the change of quality? How can it convincingly show itself to be steering a bold course towards truth and knowledge when it fails to take the first, the hardest, and the most exacting look at this, its mixed, adulterated, less-than-excellent character?"

"To be highly favoured and, at the same time, to expose some deep flaw willingly and as a matter of conscience is courage. To do the opposite, to cover it up continually and employ clever means to divert attention from it is cowardice. Superficial self-criticism is one of these means. Criticism which only has the common rhetorical ring to it, the common way of focussing upon a problem, and the common way of really leaving everything, particularly one's good conscience about everything, exactly the way it was.

"The deep discourse is lacking. Academia has no deep discourse about itself. And yet here it is presenting itself as the very forum of all deep discourses.

"As a highly influential institution then – one that makes a final, virtually indispensable settlement upon the best and brightest minds of developing youth – the question remains whether these same minds might suffer some impairment, some retardation, some impoverishment due to the long, rigorous attention demanded not only by their studies but by the necessity, in order to insure highest success, of paying heed to the secret workings of the institution. Perhaps some crude labourer, never having been forced to ferret about in this manner or set himself to the odious task of learning to read the entrails of the institution, escapes something demeaning and ultimately disadvantageous.

"Is it possible that the institution is a consummately subtle and richly rewarding tyrant? What it gives or can give are the means to obtain what the whole world wants: power, position, privilege, possessions, and pecuniary reward. What it asks in return, apart from the legitimate demand for hard work, many proofs of ability, and so on, are a great number of seemingly small compromises and little adjustments, slight instances of not standing or falling upon one's own judgement but relying, often despite inner doubt and discomfort, upon the judgement of others. Of course, examined

individually, many of these compromises might be the legitimate offspring of good sense, greater experience, and wisdom. On the other hand, the practise of so bending to authority and official opinion, especially when it is undistinguished, arbitrary, questionable, and even coercive, forms a habit of mind which, if we are to follow Aristotle, shapes or, more properly, weakens character. It is the cultivation of the practise of not taking a stand when, despite compunctions or even strong claims and moral commitments to the contrary, such a stand threatens personal interests.

“Such then is the whole of my case against Academia. I do not quarrel with the fact that it brings forth many shining examples of diligent, conscientious, intelligent, capable, and highly agreeable success-seekers. I do not begrudge it its attachment to the material nor deny its contribution to the intellectual wealth of society. I do not even think myself in a position to condemn it for a certain amount of institutional insensitivity, imperfection, and traditional stodginess mixed with fashion-conscious superficiality. What I do take issue with is its gilding this medley of the low, the mediocre, and the high with the name of excellence. What I take issue with even more is its implying that this word excellence also applies to the kind of human being shaped by this institution. Such a travesty in the face of what all the past teaches us, what all great writers, thinkers, and events speak so clearly, is the mediocrity of Academia par excellence. For what it does is make a false connection between the spirit which invests the greatest human accomplishments and the spirit which guides the normal affairs, aims, and so forth of this institution. By effectively claiming that the second is on a near or equal footing with the first, it slights the first, rendering it somewhat unreal, shadowy, and insubstantial. No longer then does it seem to stand as a viable guide or even a possibly divine calling in the actual business of living and learning. Rather it becomes aloof, distant frozen – an archaic feature of certain interesting thoughts or items in books and no more. It robs the present-day consciousness of a genuine sense of connection – of even the need for a connection – with the gods which present themselves in one’s kitchen.”

– Do we really need all this to tell us that the institution is imperfect? That mere human beings manage its affairs and teach in it? Alice, I frankly don’t see any advantage in speaking about the university as if it should be functioning at the level of genius. It deals with a large number of people and so naturally must treat human excellence not at the level of one in a million but at the level of what works best for most people.

I’ll admit that my case against Academia doesn’t register where most people

are most of the time but only where they are some of the time.

– Exactly. It's not the theoretical or practical he's primarily concerned with. Oh, Andrew, if only Academia said what you're saying right now! Loudly and clearly! But of course it doesn't and so naturally it makes truth-telling curtsy to the values of efficiency and payoff.

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