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978-1-108-02205-7 - Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education

John Henry Newman

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### Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education

Throughout his career as a theologian, deacon, priest and cardinal, John Henry Newman (1801–90) remained a committed believer in the value of education. A graduate of Trinity College, Oxford, his own academic experiences shaped his friendships, politics and faith. His *Discourses* (1852), delivered initially as a series of lectures when he was rector of the newly-established Catholic University of Ireland, inspired a generation of young and talented Catholic scholars. Providing an intelligent but accessible analysis of the relationship between theology and other academic disciplines, the lectures were celebrated in the popular press for dispensing instruction to those who 'had no traditions to guide them in forming a correct estimate of what a university ought to be'. Newman argued that a university should foster the 'diffusion and extension of knowledge' rather than religious or moral training, and that it should prepare students for life in the world.

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# Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education

*Addressed to the Catholics of Dublin*

JOHN HENRY NEWMAN



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DISCOURSES  
ON  
THE SCOPE AND NATURE  
OF  
UNIVERSITY EDUCATION.  
ADDRESSED TO  
THE CATHOLICS OF DUBLIN.

BY  
JOHN HENRY NEWMAN, D.D.,  
PRESIDENT OF THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND,  
AND PRIEST OF THE ORATORY OF ST. PHILIP NERI.

“ATTINGIT SAPIENTIA A FINE USQUE AD FINEM EORTITER, ET DISPONIT OMNIA  
SUAVITER”.

DUBLIN :  
JAMES DUFFY, 7 WELLINGTON QUAY,  
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IN GRATEFUL NEVER-DYING REMEMBRANCE  
 OF HIS MANY FRIENDS AND BENEFACTORS,  
 LIVING AND DEAD,  
 AT HOME AND ABROAD,  
 IN IRELAND, GREAT BRITAIN, FRANCE,  
 IN BELGIUM, GERMANY, POLAND, ITALY, AND MALTA,  
 IN NORTH AMERICA, AND OTHER COUNTRIES,  
 WHO, BY THEIR RESOLUTE PRAYERS AND PENANCES,  
 AND BY THEIR GENEROUS STUBBORN EFFORTS,  
 AND BY THEIR MUNIFICENT ALMS,  
 HAVE BROKEN FOR HIM THE STRESS  
 OF A GREAT ANXIETY,  
**THESE DISCOURSES,**  
 OFFERED TO OUR LADY AND ST. PHILIP ON ITS RISE,  
 COMPOSED UNDER ITS PRESSURE,  
 FINISHED ON THE EVE OF ITS TERMINATION,  
 ARE RESPECTFULLY AND AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED  
  
 BY THE AUTHOR.

IN FEST. PRÆSENT.  
 B.V.M. 1852.

P R E F A C E .  

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THE view taken of a University in the Discourses which form this Volume, is of the following kind:—that it is a place of *teaching* universal *knowledge*. This implies that its object is, on the one hand, intellectual, not moral; and, on the other, that it is the diffusion and extension of knowledge, rather than the advancement. If its object were scientific and philosophical discovery, I do not see why a University should have students; if religious training, I do not see how it can be the seat of philosophy and science.

Such is a University in its *essence*, and independently of its relation to the Church. But, practically speaking, it cannot fulfil its



object duly, such as I have described it, without the Church's assistance; or, to use the theological term, the Church is necessary for its *integrity*. Not that its main characters are changed by this incorporation: it still has the office of intellectual education; but the Church steadies it in the performance of that office.

Such are the main principles of the Discourses which follow; though it would be unreasonable for me to expect, that I have treated so large and important a field of thought with the fulness and precision, necessary to secure me from incidental misconceptions of my meaning on the part of the reader. It is true, there is nothing novel or singular in the argument which I have been pursuing, but this does not protect me from such misconceptions; for the very circumstance that the views I have been delineating are not original with me, may lead to false notions as to my relations of opinion towards those, from whom I happened in the first instance to learn them, and may cause me to

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be interpreted by the objects or sentiments of schools, to which I should be simply opposed.

For instance, some persons may be tempted to complain, that I have servilely followed the English idea of a University, to the disparagement of that Knowledge, which I profess to be so strenuously upholding; and they may anticipate that an academical system, formed upon my model, will result in nothing better or higher than in the production of that antiquated variety of human nature and remnant of feudalism, called “a gentleman”.\* Now, I have anticipated this charge in various parts of my discussion; if, however, any Catholic is found to prefer it (and to Catholics of course this volume is addressed), I would have him first of all ask himself the previous question, *what* he conceives to be the reason contemplated by the Holy See, in recommending just now to the Irish Church the establishment of a Catholic University? Has the Supreme Pontiff recommended it for the sake of the Sciences, which are to be the

\* Vid. Huber's *English Universities*, London, 1843, vol. ii., part 1. pp. 321, etc.

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matter, or rather of the Students, who are to be the subjects of its teaching? Has he any obligation or duty at all towards secular knowledge as such? Would it become his Apostolical Ministry, and his descent from the Fisherman, to have a zeal for the Baconian or other philosophy of man for its own sake? or, on the other hand, does the Vicar of Christ contemplate such achievements of the intellect, as far as he contemplates them, solely and simply in their relation to the interests of Revealed Truth? Has he any more direct jurisdiction over the wisdom than over the civil power of this world? Is he bound by office or by vow, to be the preacher of the theory of gravitation, or a martyr for electro-magnetism? Would he be acquitting himself of the dispensation committed to him, if he were smitten with an abstract love of these matters, however true, or beautiful, or ingenious, or useful? What he does, he does for the sake of Religion; if he looks with satisfaction on strong temporal governments, which promise perpetuity, it is for the sake of Religion; and if

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he encourages and patronizes art and science, it is for the sake of Religion. He rejoices in the widest and most philosophical systems of intellectual education, from an intimate conviction that Truth is his real ally, as it is his profession; and that Knowledge and Reason are sure ministers to Faith.

This being undeniable, it is plain, that, when he suggests to the Irish Hierarchy the establishment of a University, his first and chief and direct object is, not science, art, professional skill, literature, the discovery of knowledge, but some benefit or other, by means of literature and science, to his own children; not indeed their formation on any narrow or fantastic type, as, for instance, that of an “English Gentleman” may be called, but their exercise and growth in certain habits, moral or intellectual. Nothing short of this can be his aim, if, as becomes the Successor of the Apostles, he is to be able to say with St. Paul, “Non judicavi me scire aliquid inter vos, nisi Jesum Christum, et hunc crucifixum”. Just as a commander wishes to have tall and well-

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formed and vigorous soldiers, not from any abstract devotion to the military standard of height or age, but for the purposes of war, and no one thinks it anything but natural and praiseworthy in him, to be contemplating, not abstract qualities, but his own living and breathing men; so, in like manner, when the Church founds a University, she is not cherishing talent, genius, or knowledge, for their own sake, but for the sake of her children, with a view to their spiritual welfare, and their religious influence and usefulness, with the object of training them to fill their respective posts in life better, and making them more intelligent, capable, active members of society.

Nor can it justly be said that in thus acting she sacrifices Science, and perverts a University from its proper end, under a pretence of fulfilling the duties of her mission, as soon as it is taken into account, that there are other institutions, far more suited to act as instruments of stimulating philosophical inquiry and extending the boundaries of our knowledge than a

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University. Such for instance, are the literary and scientific “Academies”, which are so celebrated in Italy and France, and which have frequently been connected with Universities, as committees, or, as it were, congregations or delegacies subordinate to them. Thus the present Royal Society originated in Charles the Second’s time, in Oxford; such just now are the Ashmolean and Architectural Societies in the same seat of learning, which have risen in our own time. Such too is the British Association, a migratory body, which at least at times is found in the halls of the Protestant Universities of the United Kingdom, and the faults of which lie, not in its exclusive devotion to science, but in graver matters which it is irrelevant here to enter upon. Such again is the Antiquarian Society, the Royal Academy for the Fine Arts, and others which might be mentioned. Such is the sort of institution, which primarily contemplates Science itself, and not students; and, in thus speaking, I am saying nothing of my own, being supported by no less an authority than Car-

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dinal Gerdil. “Ce n’ est pas”, he says, “qu’ il y ait aucune véritable opposition entre l’ esprit des Académies et celui des Universités ; ce sont seulement des vues différentes. Les Universités sont établies pour *enseigner* les sciences *aux élèves* qui veulent s’y former ; les Académies se proposent *de nouvelles recherches* à faire dans la carrière des sciences. Les Universités d’ Italie ont fourni des sujets qui ont fait honneur aux Académies ; et celles-ci ont donné aux Universités des Professeurs, qui ont rempli les chaires avec la plus grande distinction”.\*

The nature of the case and the history of philosophy combine to recommend to us this “division of” intellectual “labour” between Academies and Universities. To discover and to teach are distinct functions ; they are also distinct gifts, and are not commonly found united in the same person. He too who spends his day in dispensing his existing knowledge to all comers, is unlikely to have either leisure or energy to acquire new. The

\* Opere, t. 3, p. 353.

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common sense of mankind has associated the search after truth with seclusion and quiet. The greatest thinkers have been too intent on their subject to admit of interruption; they have been men of absent minds and idiosyncratic habits, and have, more or less, shunned the lecture room and the public school. Pythagoras, the light of Magna Græcia, lived for a time in a cave: Thales, the light of Ionia, lived unmarried and in private, and refused the invitations of princes. Plato withdrew from Athens to the groves of Academus. Aristotle gave twenty years to a studious discipleship under him. Friar Bacon lived in his tower upon the Isis; Newton in an intense severity of meditation which almost shook his reason. The great discoveries in chemistry and electricity were not made in Universities. Observatories are more frequently out of Universities than in them, and even when within their bounds need have no moral connexion with them. Porson had no classes; Elmsley lived good part of his life in the country. I do not say that there



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are not great examples the other way, perhaps Socrates, certainly Lord Bacon; still I think it must be allowed on the whole, that, while teaching involves external engagements, the natural home for experiment and speculation is retirement.

Returning then to the consideration of the question, from which we may seem to have digressed, thus much we have made good,—that, whether or no a Catholic University should put before it, as its great object, to make its students “gentlemen”, still to make them something or other *is* its great object, and not simply to protect the interests and advance the dominion of Science. If then this may be taken for granted, as I think it may, the only point which remains to be settled is, whether I have formed a probable conception of the *sort of benefit* which the Holy See has intended to confer on Catholics who speak the English tongue, by recommending to the Irish Hierarchy the establishment of a University; and this I now proceed to consider.

Here then, it is natural to ask those who

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are interested in the question, whether any better interpretation of the recommendation of the Holy See can be given, than that which I have suggested in this Volume. Certainly it does not seem to me rash to pronounce, that, whereas Protestants have great advantages of education in the Schools, Colleges, and Universities of the United Kingdom, our ecclesiastical rulers have it in purpose, that Catholics should enjoy the like advantages, whatever they are, to the full. I conceive they view it as prejudicial to the interests of Religion, that there should be any cultivation of mind bestowed upon Protestants, which is not given to their own youth also. As they wish their schools for the poorer and middle classes to be at least on a par with those of Protestants, they contemplate the same thing as regards that higher education which is given to comparatively the few. Protestant youths, who can spare the time, continue their studies till the age of twenty-one or twenty-two; thus they employ a time of life all-important and especially favourable to

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mental culture. I conceive that our Prelates are impressed with the fact and its consequences, that a youth who ends his education at seventeen, is no match (*cæteris paribus*) for one who ends it at twenty-one.

All classes indeed of the community are impressed with a fact so obvious as this. The consequence is, that Catholics who aspire to be on a level with Protestants in discipline and refinement of intellect, have recourse to Protestant Universities to obtain what they cannot find at home. Here then is an additional reason,—assuming, that is (as the Rescripts from Propaganda allow me to do), that Protestant education is inexpedient for our youth,—why those advantages, whatever they are, which the Protestant sects dispense through the medium of Protestantism, should be accessible to Catholics in a Catholic form.

What are these advantages? I repeat, they are in one word the culture of the intellect. Insulted, robbed, oppressed, and thrust aside, Catholics in these islands have not been in a condition for centuries to

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attempt the sort of education, which is necessary for the man of the world, the statesman, the great proprietor, or the opulent gentleman. Their legitimate stations, duties, employments, have been taken from them, and the qualifications withal, social and intellectual, both for reversing the forfeiture, and for doing justice to the reversal. The time is come when this moral disability must be removed. Our desideratum is, not the manners and habits of gentlemen;—these can be, and are, acquired in various other ways, by good society, by foreign travel, by the innate grace and dignity of the Catholic mind;—but the force, the steadiness, the comprehensiveness and the flexibility of intellect, the command over our own powers, the instinctive just estimate of things as they pass before us, which sometimes indeed is a natural gift, but commonly is not gained without much effort and the exercise of years. This is real cultivation of mind; and I do not deny that the characteristic excellences of a gentleman are included in it. Nor need we be ashamed to admit it, since

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the time the Poet wrote, that “*Ingenuas didicisse fideliter artes, Emollit mores*”. Certainly a liberal education does manifest itself in a courtesy, propriety, and polish of word and action, which is beautiful in itself, and acceptable to others; but it does much more. It brings the mind into form, for the mind is like the body. Boys outgrow their shape and their strength; their limbs have to be knit together, and their constitution needs tone. Mistaking animal spirits for nerve, and over-confident in their health, ignorant what they can bear and how to manage themselves, they are immoderate and extravagant; and fall into sharp sicknesses. This is an emblem of their minds; at first they have no principles laid down within them as a foundation for the intellect to build upon; they have no discriminating convictions, and no grasp of consequences. In consequence they talk at random, if they talk much, and cannot help being flippant, or what is emphatically called “*young*”. They are merely dazzled by phenomena, instead of perceiving things.

It were well, if none remained boys all their lives; but what is more common than the sight of grown men, talking on political or moral or religious subjects, in that offhand, idle way, which we signify by the word *unreal*? “That they simply do not know what they are talking about”, is the spontaneous silent remark of any man of sense who hears them. Hence such persons have no difficulty in contradicting themselves in successive sentences, without being conscious of it. Hence others, whose defect in intellectual training is more latent, have their most unfortunate crotchets, as they are called, or hobbies, which deprive them of the influence which their estimable qualities would otherwise secure. Hence others can never look straight before them, never see the point, and have no difficulties in the most difficult subjects. Others are hopelessly obstinate and prejudiced, and return the next moment to their old opinions, after they have been driven from them, without even an attempt to explain why. Others are so intemperate and

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intractable, that there is no greater calamity for a good cause than that they should get hold of it. It is very plain from the very particulars I have mentioned, that, in this delineation of intellectual infirmities, I am drawing from Protestantism and Protestants; I am referring to what meets us in every railway carriage, in every coffee-room or *table-d'hôte*, in every mixed company. Nay, it is wonderful, that, with all their advantages, so many Protestants leave the University, with so little of real liberality and refinement of mind, in consequence of the discipline to which they have been subjected. Much allowance must be made here for original nature; much, for the detestable narrowness and (I cannot find a better word) the priggishness of their religion. Catholics, on the other hand, are, compared with them, almost born gentlemen. Take the same ranks in the two Religions, and the fact is undeniable. The simplicity, courtesy, and intelligence, for instance, of the peasants in Ireland and France have often been remarked upon. Still, after all, in this

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province, which is not of a distinctly religious nature, Catholicism does little more than create instincts and impulses, which it requires a steady training to mould into definite and permanent habits. They may begin well, and end ill. The want of that training, in Catholics, so far as there is a want, is a positive loss to them; and the existence of it among Protestants, as far as it exists, is to them a positive gain.

When the intellect has once been properly trained and formed to have a connected view or grasp of things, it will display itself with more or less effect according to its particular quality and measure in the individual. In the generality it is visible in good sense, sobriety of thought, reasonableness, candour, self-command, and steadiness of view. In some it will have developed habits of business, power of influencing others, and sagacity. In others it will elicit the talent of philosophical speculation, and lead the mind forward to eminence in this or that intellectual department. In all it will be a faculty



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of entering with comparative ease into any subject of thought, and of taking up with aptitude any science or profession. All this it will be and do in a measure, even when the mental formation be made after a model but partially true; for, as far as effectiveness goes, even false views of things have more influence and inspire more respect than none at all. Men who fancy they see what is not are more energetic, and make their way better, than those who see nothing; and so the undoubting infidel, the fanatic, the bigot, are able to do much, while the mere hereditary Christian, who has never realized the truths which he holds, is able to do nothing. But, if consistency of view can add so much strength even to error, what may it not be expected to furnish to the dignity, the energy, and the influence of Truth!

Some one, however, will perhaps object that I am but advocating that spurious philosophy, which shows itself in what, for want of a word, I may call "viewiness", when I speak so much of the formation, and consequent

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grasp, of the intellect. It may be said that the theory of University Education, which I have been delineating, if acted upon, would teach youths nothing soundly or thoroughly, and would dismiss them with nothing better than brilliant general views about all things whatever.

This indeed would be a most serious objection, if well founded, to what I have advanced in this Volume, and would deserve and would gain my immediate attention, had I any reason to think that I could not remove it at once, by a simple explanation of what I consider the true *mode* of educating, were this the place to do so. But these Discourses are directed simply to the consideration of the *aims* and *principles* of Education. Suffice it then to say here, that I hold very strongly that the first step in intellectual training is to impress upon a boy's mind the idea of science, method, order, principle, and system; of rule and exception, of richness and harmony. This is commonly and excellently done by beginning with Grammar; nor can too

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great accuracy, or minuteness and subtlety of teaching be used towards him, as his faculties expand, with this simple view. Hence it is that critical scholarship is so important a discipline for him, when he is leaving school for the University. A second science is the Mathematics: this should follow Grammar, still with the same object, viz., to give him a conception of development and arrangement from and around a common centre. Hence it is that Chronology and Geography are so necessary for him, when he reads History, which is otherwise little better than a story-book. Hence too Metrical Composition, when he reads poetry; in order to stimulate his powers into action in every practicable way, and to prevent a passive reception of images and ideas which may else pass out of the mind as soon as they have entered it. Let him once gain this habit of method, of starting from fixed points, of making his ground good as he goes, of distinguishing what he knows from what he does not, and I conceive he will be gradually initiated into

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the largest and truest philosophical views, and will feel nothing but impatience and disgust at the random theories and imposing sophistries and dashing paradoxes, which carry away half-formed and superficial intellects.

Such parti-coloured ingenuities are indeed one of the chief evils of the day, and men of real talent are not slow to minister to them. An intellectual man, as the world now conceives of him, is one who is full of “views”, on all subjects of philosophy, on all matters of the day. It is almost thought a disgrace not to have a view at a moment’s notice on any question from the Personal Advent to the Cholera or Mesmerism. This is owing in great measure to the necessities of periodical literature, now so much in request. Every quarter of a year, every month, every day, there must be a supply, for the gratification of the public, of new and luminous theories on the subjects of religion, foreign politics, home politics, civil economy, finance, trade, agriculture, emigration, and the colonies. Slavery, the gold fields, German philoso-

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phy, the French Empire, Wellington, Peel, Ireland, must all be practised on, day after day, by what are called original thinkers. As the great man's guest must produce his good stories or songs at the evening banquet, as the platform orator exhibits his telling facts at mid-day, so the journalist lies under the stern obligation of extemporising his lucid views, leading ideas, and nutshell truths for the breakfast table. The very nature of periodical literature, broken into small wholes, and demanded punctually to an hour, involves this extempore philosophy. "Almost all the Ramblers", says Boswell of Johnson, "were written just as they were wanted for the press; he sent a certain portion of the copy of an essay, and wrote the remainder while the former part of it was printing". Few men have the gifts of Johnson, who to great vigour and resource of intellect, when it was fairly roused, united a rare common-sense and a conscientious regard for veracity, which preserved him from flippancy or extravagance in writing. Few men are Johnsons;

yet how many men at this day are assailed by incessant demands on their mental powers, which only a productiveness like his could suitably supply! There is a demand for a reckless originality of thought, and a sparkling plausibility of argument, which he would have despised, even if he could have displayed; a demand for crude theory and unsound philosophy, rather than none at all. It is a sort of repetition of the “*Quid novi?*” of the Areopagus, and it must have an answer. Men must be found, who can treat, where it is necessary, like the Athenian Sophist, *de omni scibili*,

“Grammaticus, Rhetor, Geometres, Pictor, Aliptes,  
Augur, Schoenobates, Medicus, Magus, omnia novit”.

I am speaking of such writers with a feeling of real sympathy for men who are under the rod of a cruel slavery. I have never been in such circumstances myself, nor in the temptations which they involve; but most men who have had to do with composition, must know the distress which at times it occasions them to have to write—a distress