

SECULAR HUMANISM

There are more than six thousand institutions of higher education in America.¹ “Institution” is a colorless word, and I use it for that reason. For the variety of colleges and universities in America today is so vast that only a word with almost no content could possibly encompass them all.

There are the great research universities, with their graduate programs, professional schools, and specialized facilities for advanced research; the residential liberal arts colleges, devoted to undergraduate education; the two-year state and community colleges, serving for the most part a local population and providing career training as well as a preparation for further study elsewhere; and today, the “electronic” universities that offer education at a distance for those who find it easier to work at home. All these schools meet real needs. But the differences among them—of function, character, and aim—are so large that “college” and “university” are only words they share in common.²

Of the many functions our colleges and universities serve, most need little explanation or defense. The advancement of research,

which our largest universities are set up to promote, is a self-evident good. The new knowledge that research produces is of value in its own right and has immense practical benefits. To a degree that few Americans perhaps fully appreciate, their material well-being is today a consequence of discoveries first made in the libraries and laboratories of the country's research universities.

Vocational training, at all levels, is another unquestioned good. Whether one wants to be an architect or electrician, a doctor or dental hygienist, a lawyer or court reporter, technical training is today a prerequisite. All but the most unskilled forms of labor are increasingly based on knowledge of a kind that can be acquired only in school, and in supplying that knowledge America's colleges and universities provide a tremendous service to the individuals who come to them to learn a trade or profession and make an enormous (if not fully visible) contribution to the country's economy.³

There are other, non-economic contributions that our colleges and universities make to the welfare of their communities and of the country as a whole. In broad terms, these might be called political. I have in mind the cultivation of the habits of respectfulness and tolerance on which responsible citizenship in a diverse democracy depends. Colleges and universities do this not so much by preaching the virtues of these habits (though they do that too), as by creating an environment in which students are required to interact with others quite unlike themselves—often for the first time in their lives—and to develop the attitudes of open-mindedness and toleration that this demands. Colleges and universities are not, of course, the only such environment—the contemporary workplace is another—but they are an important one, and the contribution they

make to strengthening the spirit of democratic citizenship is one of their most valuable functions.⁴

This is an impressive list of goods. But there is another that must be added to it. It is harder to define but just as real. It is the good of helping students come to grips with the question of what living is for—the good, as Alexander Meiklejohn, the president of Amherst College, described it a century ago, of helping young people fashion “a life worth living” from their given endowments of desire, opportunity, and talent.⁵

College is for many a time to prepare for their careers. It is, in fact, the first stage of their careers, a period of preliminary academic training to be followed by other forms of training or by work itself. For those who approach it with this goal in mind, their college education has a clear and measurable value. It contributes in a direct way to the achievement of an already-fixed objective. But its value depends upon the determinacy of the goal toward which it is directed. For others, who are less sure what they want to do or be, for whom the question of how they should spend their lives is a more open one, a college education can be of value for a different reason. It can help them meet the challenge of gaining a deeper insight into their own commitments, of refining for themselves the picture of a life that has purpose and value, of a life that is worth living and not just successful in the narrower sense of achievement in a career.

For undergraduates who approach their studies in a state of curiosity or confusion about these things, a college education can help them find their bearings. It can help them confront the question, which comes before all vocational training and goes beyond any answer that such training can supply, of what living itself is for.

And if it succeeds in doing this, even modestly and incompletely, their education has for them a value very different from the value it has for those who come to college with their expectations fixed. Indeed, it has a value of an opposite sort, for it is the very absence of those settled goals that give all vocational education its utility that makes the question of what living is for so important.

To have the freedom to pursue this question for a period of time in early adulthood is a great luxury. Many cannot afford it. The demands of life press too insistently for them to give the question its due. And some of those who have the time choose not to use it for this purpose. They are distracted or incurious. But for more than a few, who have both the freedom and the inclination, college is a time to explore the meaning of life with an openness that becomes harder to preserve the further one enters into the responsibilities of adulthood, with their many entanglements. College is a time for other things too, but it is also a time to survey, with as open a mind as one can manage, the horizons of the stirring and mysterious venture in which, by the age of eighteen or twenty, an attentive young person will have begun to grasp that he or she, like every human being, is fatefully engaged. For those who see the value of this survey, and have the time to make it, a college education affords an opportunity that may not come again. And however few they are in number or in proportion to the student population as a whole, it seems natural to regard this opportunity as a very great good that we would wish others to share and regret if they can't for lack of money or time.

It is the goal of every undergraduate liberal arts program to provide its students with an opportunity of this kind. Every college and university that has such a program describes it in essentially

similar terms—as a means to acquaint its students with a wide range of human pursuits and to equip them with a general knowledge of themselves and of the world that will prepare them to meet the personal, ethical, and social challenges of life, regardless of the career they eventually choose. All liberal arts education is defined in consciously non-vocational terms. It is not a preparation for this job or that, for one career rather than another. It is a preparation for the “job” of living, which of course is not a job at all. Different schools undertake to do this in different ways. The variety of liberal arts programs is enormous. But all rest on the assumption that one important aim of undergraduate education is to afford the young men and women who are its beneficiaries an opportunity to reflect on the curious and inspiring adventure of life before they have gone too far in it and lost the time and perhaps the nerve for such reflections.⁶

Yet curiously, while emphasizing the importance of questions of meaning and purpose that transcend the narrowly vocational, few liberal arts programs today provide a place for their sustained and structured exploration. Few offer organized programs of the kind once associated with (now politically charged) phrases like “the great books curriculum,” or “the Western tradition,” or “the tradition of arts and letters,” in which students and teachers pursued the perennial puzzles of human existence through the disciplined study of an interrelated series of works in which the question of how a person ought to spend his or her life provided a connecting theme and organizing focus of inquiry. Some programs of this sort still exist, of course, including some very famous ones like the Contemporary Civilization Course at Columbia, introduced at the time of the First World War. And individual courses that address these

issues in a deliberate way can be found in every liberal arts program. But the attempt to provide the students in these programs with a broad, structured, and shared introduction to the alternative views of life's purpose and value that ought to be weighed as they struggle to define life's meaning for themselves is today an increasing rarity in American higher education. Fewer and fewer schools attempt to do this and the idea that it is even worth trying to do so—that it is a valuable and constructive goal to pursue—is one that many teachers and students now reject.

Today, many of those teaching in liberal arts programs, even teachers of the humanities, feel uncomfortable asserting the competence or authority to lead their students in an organized inquiry of this sort. They claim not to possess any special wisdom about the meaning of life that might be communicated to their students in a disciplined way. They insist that they are not professionally qualified to lead their students in the search for an answer to the question of what living is for. The subject may of course come up outside of class, where teacher and student feel free to speak in more intimate terms. But few college or university teachers today believe they have either the right or duty to offer their students organized instruction in the value and purpose of living. And this belief is by and large shared by their students, who for the most part do not hope or expect to receive such instruction in class.

That of course is not to say that students are uninterested in these questions, or think their academic studies irrelevant to them. Most students, especially those enrolled in liberal arts programs, have a passionate (if intermittent) interest in the question of what makes a life valuable and fulfilling. And most regard their academic work—all of it potentially—as a useful source of information and

inspiration in reflecting on this question. But like their teachers, they regard the question as a personal one that cannot usefully be studied in a public and organized way.

What is the physical world made of and why does matter behave as it does? How do living organisms function and evolve? When are markets competitive? Is democracy the best form of government? Does the number pi have a pattern? How do we know what we know? These and countless other questions are appropriate subjects of classroom instruction. They can all be studied in a structured and rigorous fashion. In most colleges and universities, there are courses and departments devoted to their examination and teachers trained to guide students in their study. But the question of what living is for, of what ultimately matters in our lives and why, is only rarely a subject of explicit instruction in the way these others are. There are departments of geology and sociology and Spanish, but no departments in the meaning of life. Indeed, the very idea seems laughable. Who can imagine an Associate Professor of the Meaning of Life? Unlike the countless subjects best studied in a classroom with an organized curriculum under the supervisory eye of a professionally qualified teacher, the question of what living is for is one that today even those students gripped by the question are likely to regard as a personal matter most usefully explored outside of school, in the company of family and friends. And their teachers are for the most part likely to agree.

A student who holds this view might express it as follows. "Only I," he might say, "can decide what ultimately matters in my life. That is something I must do on my own. It is true that everything I learn in school, or outside it for that matter, bears on my search for an answer. All of my experience, academic and otherwise, deserves

to be taken into account. But there is no academic discipline to guide me in my search for an answer to the question of life's meaning. There is no method or technique, no organized body of knowledge, no disciplined course of study, on which I can rely. There are no teachers whose special responsibility it is to frame this question or lead me in the investigation of it. No teacher has either the competence or right to do this. Perhaps no one does, but at least my family and friends know me personally, and love me. If I take the question up with anyone at all, I ought to take it up with them. The question of what living is for cannot be studied in school."

This describes the attitude of many students in our colleges and universities today, even those in liberal arts programs devoted to preparing them for the non-vocational task of fashioning what Meiklejohn called a "life worth living." And it describes the attitude of many of their teachers, who join in the judgment that the question of life's meaning is not a fit topic for study in school. Their agreement on this point is an important premise of American higher education at the start of the twenty-first century.

But this has not always been so. Even a half-century ago, the question of life's meaning had a more central and respected place in higher education than it does today.⁷ It was not always given this name. But the question of how to spend one's life, of what to care about and why, the question of which commitments, relations, projects, and pleasures are capable of giving a life purpose and value: regardless of the name it was given, and even if, as was often the case, it was given no name at all, this question was taken more seriously by more of our colleges and universities in the middle years of the twentieth century than it is today. It was a question that institutions of higher learning felt they had the right and duty to address in an

explicit and disciplined way. The responsibility for doing this fell in particular to the humanities. A half-century ago, many teachers in these fields still believed in the possibility and value of an organized study of the mysteries of life. But under pressure, first, from the modern research ideal whose authority today dominates the humanities as it does all branches of learning, and, second, from the culture of political correctness that has been so particularly influential in these disciplines for the past forty years, the question of the value and purpose of living, of the sources of fulfillment available to us as mortal creatures with ambitions of the most varied kinds, has been pushed to the margins of respectability even in the humanities. It has been stripped of its legitimacy as a question that teachers of the humanities feel they may properly and competently address with their students in a formal program of instruction. It has been exiled from the classroom and kicked out of school, so that today it survives only in private, in *pianissimo*, in the extracurricular lives of teachers and students, even in those liberal arts programs whose distinctive purpose presupposes the vital importance of this question itself: the depressing conclusion of an historical development that has privatized a subject the humanities once undertook to investigate in a public and organized way, before the modern research ideal and the culture of political correctness made it an embarrassment to do so.



If one asks whether the purpose and value of life is a subject that can usefully be studied in school, and surveys the history of American

higher education with this question in mind, that history can be divided into three phases. The first, and longest, begins with the founding of Harvard College in the early seventeenth century and lasts until the Civil War. It might be called the “age of piety.” College education (and there were of course as yet no universities) rested on the premise that the ends of human living are not merely a fit subject of instruction but the one subject, before all others, that young men must study and learn. Instruction in the meaning of life proceeded on the basis of dogmatic assumptions that were simply taken for granted.

The second phase begins with the establishment of the first universities in the decades following the Civil War and ends in the middle years of the twentieth century. It might be called the “age of secular humanism,” a term I shall define with more precision later on. The meaning of life continues to be an organized subject of undergraduate teaching. But it is now the special responsibility of the humanities to provide such instruction, which can no longer proceed on the old dogmatic assumptions that had once been accepted without question. A more pluralistic approach to the subject, based on a critical study of the great works of Western literature, philosophy, and art, emerges as a successor to the dogmatic program of the antebellum college.

The third phase, in which we find ourselves today, begins in the late 1960s. How long it will last is uncertain. In this third phase, the question of life’s meaning has ceased to be a recognized and valued subject of instruction even in the humanities. It has been expelled from our colleges and universities, under pressure from the research ideal and the demands of political correctness.

At the start, America’s colleges were all religious institutions.

What they taught their students about the purpose and value of life was itself a branch of religious instruction. Later, in the age of secular humanism, church and school drew apart. America's colleges and universities distanced themselves from religion and claimed the authority to provide instruction in the meaning of life in a different way, and on different terms, from the instruction that America's churches continued to offer. In this second phase of American higher education, the authority to address the question of what living is for was divided between church and school. In the third phase—our phase—the abandonment by our colleges and universities of any claim to such authority has left it entirely in the hands of the churches, who now enjoy a near monopoly in the institutionally organized provision of instruction in the meaning of life. But at the start, America's colleges offered such instruction with a confidence that today only our churches possess.

The history of American higher education begins with the establishment of Harvard College in 1636. The first students at Harvard lived in a world unimaginably remote from our own. Their entire material universe consisted of a handful of crude structures, huddled on the edge of an immense and unyielding wilderness, which a few devout souls had crossed the Atlantic to build so that they might live a life of exemplary Christian piety and be a model for those they left behind, “a City on the Hill.”⁸ Those who came to build this city had to make a world from the ground up, and it can never cease to be a source of wonder that one of their first acts was the establishment of a college for the education of the young men in their midst. “After God had carried us safe to *New England*, and wee had builded our houses, provided necessaries for our liveli-hood, rear'd convenient places for Gods worship, and setled the Civill

Government: One of the next things we longed for, and looked after, was to advance *Learning* and to perpetuate it to Posterity.”⁹ But if the Puritan divines who founded Harvard College were pioneers, creating the first institution of its kind in North America, they were also heirs to a long tradition of learning, from which they took the design for their new college. Nearly all of Harvard’s founders had been educated at Cambridge or Oxford, and their own education naturally served as a model for the college they built.

The educational program at Cambridge and Oxford in the early seventeenth century had been shaped in part by the traditions of medieval scholasticism and in part by the humanist revival of the century before. In broad terms, it combined a training in Latin and Greek and the close reading of works written in these languages with a rigorous study of theology that was meant to put the great works of pagan antiquity in their proper Christian perspective.¹⁰ Students at Oxford and Cambridge in the early seventeenth century heard lectures on Homer, Herodotus, Sophocles, and Cicero. They read Aristotle’s writings on ethics and studied ancient history and law. They read the Bible in Greek and listened as their teachers discussed fine points of religious doctrine. They engaged in highly structured debates of their own on classical and theological subjects. They learned the basic elements of natural science, in the Aristotelean terms in which these were still conceived. And in every branch of study, they worked mainly by copying, memorizing, and reciting passages from the texts they had been assigned. The Puritans who founded Harvard College were products of this program and brought it with them as a model.¹¹

They brought something else as well. They brought the idea, so deeply embedded in their thinking that it would not even have

occurred to them to formulate it as a principle, that the purpose of a college is to shape its students' souls. In their minds, a college was above all a place for the training of character, for the nurturing of those intellectual and moral habits that together form the basis for living the best life that one can—a life of discernment and piety, shaped by the example of the great men of the past and enlivened by a deep and unassailable love of God. Such a life might be described as the life of a Christian gentleman, and if the founders of Harvard College had been asked whether it was their aim to promote this way of life, the answer would have seemed to them self-evident. They did not think that Harvard's task was merely to impart certain useful knowledge, which its students were then free to exploit as they chose. Harvard's job was to make its students into men of a certain kind, with distinctive attitudes and dispositions, specific cares and concerns. It would never have occurred to the founders of the College that its students should be left to answer the question of life's meaning on their own.

At most, they would have recognized that a Christian gentleman might pursue one of several different careers—that he might become a minister, lawyer, teacher, or something else of the kind. But they would have rejected the idea that their college had been set up as a vocational school to prepare its students for their various post-graduate employments. They would have said that it had been created for a more elementary purpose—to provide the common base of character on which success and honor in all these endeavors depend. They would have insisted that Harvard had been established, first and most importantly, for the good of its students' souls.

They also believed they had chosen the best means to achieve this goal. This was the method of memorization and recitation.

Memorization has always been a useful method for acquiring knowledge. But to the founders of Harvard, it seemed a natural technique for achieving the higher purpose of character building as well. To acquire a text by memory is to fix in one's mind the image and example of the author and his subject. Memory is the storehouse of the soul. We draw encouragement and guidance from it. To have a well-stocked memory is to be equipped for the challenges of life—to have a repertoire of stories, speeches, and the like from which to draw, as we face our choices and evaluate the alternatives before us. Memory (and recitation, which is its public display) are in this sense not distinct from character. They are its nursery bed, a sustaining source of enlightenment and inspiration for the soul. We might even go so far as to say that memory is character itself; a man is what he remembers, and reveals himself to be the person he is in his public speech.

That, in any case, was the ideal that lay behind the practice of memorization and recitation on which the earliest experiment in American higher education was based. It is an ideal that can be traced back to ancient beginnings, to the Roman discipline of rhetoric, and even earlier sources.¹² Today, we no longer see these methods in the attractive light of this tradition. Influenced by the writings of Rousseau and Dewey, among others, we view them not as aids to the growth and equipment of the soul but as a damper on spontaneity instead.¹³ But for the Cambridge- and Oxford-educated Puritans who founded our first college, these techniques seemed the perfect means to achieve the goal of making Christian gentlemen—their main, indeed their only, object.

It is unlikely that the founders of Harvard College would have described its program as an education in the meaning of life. That

is a modern formulation they would not have chosen, or perhaps even understood. But that they were concerned with life's ultimate values, thought they possessed a stable and authoritative wisdom about them, and understood the principal responsibility of their college to be the transmission of these values by means of methods designed to implant them in its students' souls: of all this there can be no doubt.

Harvard struggled to survive in material circumstances as challenging as any ever faced by an institution of higher learning. Intellectual developments in Europe put increasing pressure on the ideal of education with which the college had begun its "errand into the wilderness."¹⁴ But at its heart, the enterprise was enlivened by a confident belief that the purpose of a college education is to answer the question of what living is for—to transmit the knowledge of what matters most in life and why, and to convey, in a psychologically compelling fashion, an understanding of the cosmic structures of meaning in which our human lives are anchored and that guarantee their own meaning in turn. Higher education in America begins with the belief that a college's first duty is to provide instruction in the meaning of life and for a long time afterward, and under pressure from many directions, this idea remained essentially unchallenged.



In the two centuries that followed Harvard's founding, hundreds of other colleges were established to serve the educational needs of their communities. By 1840, the American landscape was dotted with institutions of higher learning. Most drew their students from

the local region, though a small number had already achieved national prominence and were attracting students from farther afield. Nearly all were affiliated with a particular church but varied in the degree to which that affiliation influenced the life of the college. And of course some were more financially secure than others, though by 1840 few had achieved a reliably comfortable distance from the threat of insolvency, which eventually forced many to close their doors.

The American collegiate scene, two hundred years after the founding of Harvard College, was one of vitality and variety. During this long formative period, the American people poured their wealth and ambitions into the creation of institutions of higher learning to an extent unprecedented in the history of any other nation. In Europe, higher education had always been the privileged preserve of a social and intellectual elite. In America, it became uniquely democratic—not perfectly so, of course, but to a greater degree than at any other time or place in human history.¹⁵ The colleges that sprang up everywhere in America in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were and remain one of the enduring expressions of the peculiarly American belief that everyone is educable, even up to the highest levels of intellectual ambition. Colleges, it was said, “break up and diffuse among the people that monopoly and mental power which despotic governments accumulate for purposes of arbitrary rule, and bring to the children of the humblest families of the nation a full and fair opportunity” for higher learning—a conviction that combined democratic and aristocratic ideas in a distinctively American way.¹⁶ The antebellum college was a landmark of American civilization.

The colleges with which America was beginning to fill up in the

early years of the nineteenth century differed in many respects. But nearly all shared certain features and continued to follow, in modified form, an educational tradition that could be traced back to the founding of Harvard. Two features were especially characteristic of their organization and intellectual culture. The first was the absence of a sharp distinction among different branches of study, each the province of a separate group of teachers and students. The second was the absence of any meaningful distinction between the faculty of the college and its administration.

In colleges of the early nineteenth century, the entire curriculum was fixed. Students were required to take specific courses in a set sequence, and the reading for each course was generally prescribed for the whole student body. At Yale, which played a leading role in setting and defending curricular standards in the first half of the nineteenth century, freshmen read Livy, Horace, Homer, and Herodotus; sophomores, Cicero and Xenophon; and juniors, Aeschylus, Euripides, Plato, Thucydides, and Demosthenes. In their senior year, Yale students read texts in logic and representative writings of the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, such as Dugald Stewart and Thomas Reid. Freshmen began their study of mathematics with Euclid's *Elements* and continued the following year with Dutton's treatise on conic sections. Astronomy, geology, and chemistry were all taught using prescribed textbooks, as were geography and political economy, where the French economist Jean-Baptiste Say's book on the subject and later Francis Wayland's served as the primary texts. In every branch of study, the Yale curriculum before the Civil War was fixed in lockstep fashion, so that each student in a graduating class would have studied a nearly identical list of books that changed only gradually from year to year.¹⁷ The course of study

at other schools varied in certain details, but in broad outline resembled that of Yale, which served as a model for many.¹⁸

If students studied the same things in the same order and were expected to master a common curriculum, each of their teachers was expected to be able to teach the whole of it to them. The faculty of the antebellum college were jacks-of-all-trades, competent to teach whatever needed teaching, from Latin to natural science, at all levels of instruction.¹⁹ Even at Yale, where there was a greater division of labor than at most schools, instructors were expected to teach their students “in all subjects throughout the first three years of their college course.”²⁰ The college thus demanded a commonality of effort on the part of students and faculty alike. If students did the same work, their teachers had a common assignment as well. Students did not choose which course of study to pursue. They followed a prescribed curriculum. And their teachers did not specialize in a subject and limit their teaching to it. They taught the entire curriculum from beginning to end. There were no disciplinary distinctions of the kind we now take for granted, no “divisions” or “departments” or “majors.” Everyone was a generalist, and did more or less the same thing.

This included the administrators of the college, who were members of the teaching faculty too. The distinction between faculty and administration, which we now take for granted, did not yet exist. Before the Civil War, most colleges in fact had only a single full-time administrator—a president—who not only taught but was often the most influential teacher on the faculty, entrusted with the senior course that served as the capstone of the students’ college experience.²¹ Even late in the nineteenth century, this continued to be the practice at many schools, including large ones like Princeton and

Brown. During Timothy Dwight's presidency at Yale (1866–99), the senior class met with him for recitation once a day.²² The president of an antebellum college was not a mere functionary or fundraiser as many college and university presidents are today. He was the leading voice in his community, and others on the faculty looked to him to articulate the aims of the common enterprise in which they were engaged—the moral education of their students.

It was an enterprise based on two assumptions. The first was that teachers possess an unassailable authority on account of their superior understanding of the moral and spiritual aims of the educational process in which they and their students are involved. A teacher might be unpopular—hated, even—but still retain his moral authority. Faculty typically lived in the college buildings, along with their students, and supervised their every movement, meting out harsh punishments even for minor infractions of the rules that regulated the students' "entire existence."²³ This inevitably produced tensions between faculty and students, and occasionally even a violent reaction. At the University of Georgia, angry students stoned the president of the school and one of its professors.²⁴ But for the most part, the authoritarian premises of collegiate life remained unchallenged. Students simply assumed that their teachers knew best which habits and beliefs one must acquire in order to become a morally mature person, and which books, read in what order, are most likely to produce this result. The suggestion that moral maturity is an ambiguous idea, subject to conflicting interpretations; that teachers are in no better position to define it than their students; and that students should be free to select a course of study, in accordance with their own varying conceptions of the purpose and value of a college education, would have struck both students and faculty as absurd.

The second assumption was that every branch of study has its place in a single, integrated program of instruction and contributes to its common goal. In 1840, most American colleges still placed special weight on the study of the classics, which continued to occupy a central place in the curriculum. It is true that by the beginning of the nineteenth century, more and more attention was being given to the natural sciences, which had been revolutionized by the work of Galileo, Kepler, and Newton. The Newtonian revolution put immense pressure on the world view that for centuries had successfully accommodated Aristotle's physics and cosmology to the revealed truths of Christianity.²⁵ There were some, of course, who concluded that science and religion must henceforth go their separate ways. But in America's antebellum colleges, most of which had strong denominational affiliations, confidence remained high that science and religion could be reconciled, and much effort was expended to harmonize their claims. Courses in the new science of nature were typically followed by a course in theology, where it was demonstrated that Newton's laws of motion can be adjusted to, indeed can only be explained by, the idea of an all-knowing and beneficent God whose works, which run with clockwork precision, constitute a moral as well as mechanical order, in which man's spiritual needs and responsibilities also have their place. At Williams College, an observatory was built to better study the stars, but also so that students could elevate their thoughts "toward that fathomless fountain and author of being, who has constituted matter and all its accidents as lively emblems of the immaterial kingdom."²⁶ In this way, the seamlessness of the world was preserved. It continued to be a moral world of purposes and values.

Even the increasingly influential discipline of political economy

—a fluid blend of subjects that would later be distributed among the separate fields of economics, political science, and sociology—continued to be shaped by moral assumptions, while claiming to provide a more methodical approach to the study of human society. The curriculum of the antebellum college yielded to this claim of greater rigor. The new science of society acquired a growing authority in American colleges, along with the new science of nature.²⁷ But it too remained anchored in a set of moral beliefs, and these in turn in a set of theological assumptions that guaranteed the spiritual integrity of the world as students were taught to understand it. At Brown, Francis Wayland, the president of the college and one of the most influential educators of the period, taught courses in political economy and moral science, which he treated as different facets of a single subject.²⁸ In this regard, he was a representative of his age. For teachers everywhere continued to believe that every branch of study—classics, mathematics, natural science, political economy, and theology—has its place within a unified program of instruction whose purpose is to shape the souls of students by demonstrating to them the common moral order of the natural and social worlds, and by nurturing the habits required to meet the duties entailed by their position within it.

The founders of Harvard would hardly have recognized the landscape of American higher education two centuries later. The sheer number of colleges, their denominational variety, the growing diversity of their student bodies—all of this would have amazed them. And they would have been shocked to learn how the study of nature and of human society had changed, and what a large influence these changes had had on the curriculum of America's colleges.

But despite all this, they would also have recognized something

deeply familiar. They would have understood that the educational program of most colleges in 1840 was still directed toward a goal not all that different from their own. For two centuries on, American college life remained based on the belief that the first responsibility of a college is to provide its students with methodical assistance in their search for an answer to the question of what living is for. It still rested on the assumption that the faculty and administrators of a college are joined in a common and carefully planned campaign to provide this assistance.

The question of life's meaning was becoming more complex. The challenge to religious belief was deepening. The new sciences of nature and society were on the verge of forcing a separation of science and morality.²⁹ The intensifying national debate over slavery was having an unsettling effect on America's colleges, as on everything else.³⁰ But in 1840, the old order was still largely intact. College teachers were still confident that they possessed an authoritative wisdom about the meaning of life. They still felt it was their collective duty to convey this wisdom to their students. All this would change in the next half century. But for the moment, the spiritual confidence with which Harvard had been founded two centuries before remained alive in America's colleges.



In the decades following the Civil War, the world of American higher education was transformed. The changes that took place between 1860 and 1910 eventually brought about a near-total rupture with the old order in education, which had prevailed from

the Puritan migration of the 1630s to the Civil War, and set American higher education on a different path, one we are still following today.

At the center of these changes and of the new regime they brought about was an entirely new institution: the American university.³¹ Institutions called universities had existed in Europe for centuries. America's early colleges were modeled on them. But in the early nineteenth century, a new kind of university emerged in Europe, one that shared the name but had an importantly different purpose. This happened first and most influentially in Germany.

The new German university was organized on a novel assumption that had no precedent in the history of higher education. This was the idea that universities exist primarily to sponsor research, that their first responsibility is to provide the space, books, and other resources that scholars need to engage in the work of producing new knowledge. There had always been a few private scholars, in Germany and elsewhere, who made this their goal. But never before had the work of original scholarship been viewed as an activity of such overriding importance or made the object of such deliberate and disciplined support. Never before had the sponsorship of research been so organized, centralized, and continuous. The German university of the early nineteenth century institutionalized the idea of research and gave it, for the first time, the authority and prestige it has had ever since.

At the start, only a few teachers in a few fields embraced this idea. But its influence grew steadily, and by the second half of the nineteenth century there were many German university professors who viewed themselves primarily as scholars working to make an incremental contribution to the endlessly expanding knowledge in

their fields.³² This new ideal of scholarship contrasted sharply with the older notion that a college teacher's first duty is to give his students moral and spiritual guidance by introducing them to the more-or-less fixed system of knowledge and norms that constitutes their intellectual inheritance. This older conception, which had shaped European higher education since the Middle Ages and been transported to America in the seventeenth century, encouraged a more stable and holistic view of knowledge, one that stressed the continuity of human knowledge from each generation to the next and the capacity of a well-educated mind to grasp it as a whole. It underscored the role that teachers play as keepers of a tradition. By contrast, the new ideal of scholarship emphasized the progressive character of human knowledge, which changes and increases over time; the immensity of such knowledge, which makes it impossible for anyone to understand the whole of it and therefore requires specialization; and the importance, as scholarly virtues, of invention and originality, of the ability to upset traditions rather than sustain them.

In all these respects, the scholarly ideal represented a profound intellectual break with the past, and its acceptance brought with it equally profound changes in the organization of the institutions that embraced it. The research seminar, the graduate course, the scientific laboratory with its state-of-the-art equipment: these and other innovations were among the lasting consequences of the revolution in higher education that began in Germany's universities in the late eighteenth century and eventually spread to every corner of the world.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, several thousand Americans traveled to Germany to study in its universities. There

they encountered the new ideal of scholarship, and some attempted, though with little initial success, to transplant this ideal to American soil.³³ It was only after the Civil War, in the 1860s and 1870s, that the research ideal began to take root in America, when a few older colleges embraced it and several prominent new universities were established for the purpose of promoting scholarly work. Harvard, under the leadership of Charles Eliot; Cornell and Johns Hopkins (which opened in 1869 and 1876, respectively); the Universities of Michigan and California: these and a handful of other schools were among the first to recognize, and institutionalize, the German ideal of research scholarship in American higher education.

An emphasis on research was not, of course, the only thing that set these new American universities apart. Many also broke from tradition by offering instruction in practical and vocational subjects—ranging from veterinary medicine to business management—that had no place in the classical curriculum of the antebellum college. In Texas, professors taught advanced techniques of cotton farming and in Washington studied the best ways of raising salmon.³⁴ The idea that a university exists to serve the people in concretely helpful ways, that it is devoted not only to the education of an elite and to the advancement of theoretical knowledge but to the material improvement of the lives of the citizens of its state (or of the country as a whole), was an idea that had tremendous influence on American higher education during this period, under the provocative stimulus, in particular, of the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862, which transferred federal land to the states for the purpose of establishing colleges on the condition that they teach “agriculture and the mechanic arts” along with more traditional subjects.³⁵

Not every university responded to the call for more practical

studies with the same enthusiasm, however, and some actively opposed it (Harvard and other elite private universities, in particular). But every institution that aspired to be a university, or to be called one, felt compelled to embrace the ethic of scholarly research. In the fifty years that followed the end of the Civil War, the acceptance of the research ideal became the one common characteristic of all American universities, large and small, public and private, Eastern and Western, however much they differed in other respects.

The acceptance of the research ideal had many institutional consequences of lasting importance. In addition to the ones I have mentioned, these included the provision of sabbatical leaves for the pursuit of research; the establishment of professional journals for the publication of research; and the adoption of hiring and promotion standards based upon scholarly achievement. These developments came more quickly at some schools than at others and were embraced with varying degrees of enthusiasm and completeness at different institutions. But the embrace of the research ideal had two broad consequences that affected the whole of American higher education in especially significant ways. The first was the demise of the so-called "prescriptive" curriculum and the second the rise of academic specialization.

Students in the antebellum college had taken the same courses in the same order. Their curriculum was entirely prescribed. It was assumed that a student who followed this program for four years would, by the end, know everything a well-educated gentleman needs to know to be prepared for life's intellectual and moral challenges. The idea that knowledge is accretive, that it is constantly expanding and becoming more refined, and that the more refined a branch of knowledge becomes the more expertise one needs to grasp

it, put tremendous pressure on this older ideal. It made it increasingly implausible to think that any student—even the brightest and most disciplined—could master the barest outlines of human knowledge in four years.

If not, then a choice of some kind had to be made. Something had to be selected for study and made a subject of special attention. Other things had to be ignored. And if it was unavoidable that a selection be made, who better to make it than the student himself?³⁶ For who knows better than the student which fields of study are well-suited to his interests and talents, and likely to reward the effort their mastery requires? President Eliot of Harvard was the great champion of this view.³⁷ The late-nineteenth-century romantic belief in the virtue of expressing one's personality against the forces of convention and the very practical idea that a college education should be fitted to a student's vocational plans lent additional support to the notion that students be allowed to elect (at least some of) their own courses.³⁸ This has remained an axiom in American higher education ever since. The tide has gone back and forth, with the principle of prescription at times regaining at least some of the ground it lost to that of election. The perennial debate over the wisdom of a "core curriculum" is one expression of the continuing contest between these two great principles.³⁹ But the idea of a single, comprehensive program of instruction that every student must accept on identical terms has never regained the legitimacy it enjoyed before the explosive expansion of knowledge driven by the research ideal.

The widening acceptance of the research ideal had a second consequence. In addition to promoting the principle of student election, it hastened the emergence of distinct academic disciplines

with separate subjects and discrete bodies of knowledge, out of the undifferentiated faculty of the old-time college. As the research ideal took hold, faculties divided into departments and then into ever more specialized units of teaching and scholarship. In the 1880s, philosophy emerged as “an important and well-defined department at leading American universities.”⁴⁰ Departments of English soon followed. At most schools, the teaching of modern European languages other than English became a distinct discipline too, which further divided into departments of French and German. In 1893, the department of biology at the University of Chicago was reorganized into five separate departments of zoology, botany, anatomy, neurology, and physiology.⁴¹

Those who embraced the research ideal sought above all to make an original contribution to some expanding body of scholarly knowledge. This became for them the new benchmark of professional success. To succeed on these terms one had to specialize, to become an expert in some particular branch of study. Teachers who held onto the older ideal and continued to aspire to a comprehensive grasp of human knowledge were doomed to remain dilettantes in the new world of specialized research. Their lack of expertise disabled them from making an original contribution in any area of work. Only those who concentrated on a single discipline while ignoring all others could hope to add in a meaningful way to the expanding storehouse of learning in their fields.

By the last decades of the nineteenth century, the world of the antebellum college, with its prescriptive curriculum and unitary faculty, seemed more and more remote. Increasingly, college and university teachers (even those not directly engaged in research) were expected to have some special knowledge of a particular disci-

pline, an expectation that over time was equated with graduate training, and eventually with the possession of a Ph.D.⁴² Students were expected to specialize too—to “major” or “concentrate” in a particular field—so that they might acquire an understanding of at least one subject that went beyond the shallow dilettantism of the gentleman-amateur. The curriculum was rearranged along subject matter lines, with introductory courses in each discipline leading to more advanced ones. And faculties were divided into separate departments, each responsible for instruction in a single subject and exercising a growing autonomy over the hiring and promotion of its members. In 1840, with the rarest of exceptions, America’s colleges exhibited none of these features. Sixty years later, its leading universities and a growing number of liberal arts colleges displayed them all, at least in nascent form.



The faculty of the antebellum college had been concerned mainly with the moral and spiritual education of its students. The expectations and ambitions engendered by the research ideal encouraged a shift away from this concern toward a preoccupation with the advancement of knowledge in a particular field of scholarly work. Increasingly, the old idea that a program of higher education should be—or even could be—organized around the question of the ends of human life, of how and for the sake of what one ought to live, lost its appeal in favor of the new idea that a college or university is, first and foremost, a gathering of academic specialists inspired by their shared commitment to scholarship as a vocation.

No discipline that hoped to secure a place in the new university system could escape the imperatives of the research ideal. Still, there were some in which the older concern with the purpose and value of human life continued to be felt more strongly and to retain greater credibility than in other areas of study. These were the disciplines we call the humanities—literature, philosophy, history, classics, and the fine arts—the fields that make up one of the three great families of academic subjects into which university and college faculties came to be divided in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Only in the humanities did the question of life's meaning retain its salience in an educational regime now dominated by the specialized interests and needs of the scholar. In the natural and social sciences, it quickly ceased to be a recognizable question at all.

In the old order, even the natural sciences had been closely tied to human concerns. Under the heading of “natural philosophy,” physics and ethics were joined in a continuum along which a student might move without interruption, studying first the mechanics of God's creation and then the attributes of God Himself, including His moral relation to mankind. By the end of the nineteenth century, the study of nature had been thoroughly disenchanted, in part because of the intensifying demands of research itself, which could be met only if the investigation of the physical world were purged of all moral and theological presumptions. Their elimination left a material universe whose structure could now be described with astounding precision but which was itself devoid of meaning and purpose. As a result, the physical sciences ceased to be concerned with, or to have much to contribute to, the search for an answer to the question of the meaning of life. To the extent that human beings now figured in these disciplines at all, they did so only as physical or

biological units subject to the same laws of spiritless motion that govern the behavior of nonhuman bodies as well.⁴³

The new social sciences, which emerged as distinct disciplines in the second half of the nineteenth century, were similarly disconnected from the question of life's meaning. In one important respect, of course, the social sciences bore a close relation to the humanities, for the subjects they studied—the nature and workings of government and of human society generally—had been topics of observation and analysis in the humanistic tradition for centuries. But practitioners of the social sciences claimed to have something their humanist predecessors lacked: a set of methods that made it possible, for the first time, to study these age-old topics in a rigorous and systematic fashion. The great humanists who had written about the nature of human society had done so on the basis of their own, unsystematic experience of the world and their personal judgments of it. Their findings had necessarily been incomplete and anecdotal. The new social sciences began with the ambition to study the various aspects of society—its political, cultural, and economic dimensions—in a more impersonal and organized way, with the aid of novel quantitative methods that enabled them to achieve a previously unattainable degree of precision and objectivity both in the empirical description of human society and in the analysis of its governing laws.⁴⁴

It was this drive toward greater rigor and objectivity, more than anything else, that set the new disciplines of political science, economics, and sociology apart from the older humanistic disciplines of philosophy, history, and rhetoric. Like their humanist counterparts, the social scientists who first self-consciously identified themselves as such hoped to understand the social life of mankind. But in

contrast to the humanists, who had only their own experience, taste, and judgment on which to rely, the social scientists who took up the humanists' questions were equipped with a panoply of methods that enabled them to search for answers of a more impersonal and ethically neutral kind. This new approach produced remarkable results. But at the same time it severed the social sciences' connection to the personal and value-laden question of what living is for. For the new methods of the social sciences necessarily directed attention away from the struggles of the individual soul toward the general structures of society—toward man in the aggregate. Those who embraced these methods postponed, or eliminated entirely, the questions of ultimate value around which these struggles revolve and put a passion for objective knowledge in the place of spiritual concerns.⁴⁵

This displacement was not an accident, but a deliberate adjustment of outlook essential to the social sciences' success. For only by eliminating all personal questions of value from their scholarly work could the practitioners of the new social sciences associate themselves, however loosely, with their colleagues in the natural sciences, whose achievements set then, as they do today, the standard by which the objectivity of all knowledge is measured. Only in this way were the social sciences able to accumulate the tremendous authority and prestige they now enjoy under the aegis of the research ideal. But this very adjustment of outlook and method, which brought the social sciences closer to the natural sciences and dramatically increased their intellectual authority, depersonalized and despiritualized these disciplines in a way that disabled them from providing organized help in the search for an answer to the question of the meaning of life.

Once the college dissolved into separate departments, each ded-

icated to the advancement of knowledge in a particular field, it was no longer clear where help of this kind might be found. Neither the natural nor the social sciences were able to supply it. Neither even claimed or aspired to do so. The responsibility for providing such help thus fell, by default, to the humanities. The humanities seemed, moreover, well-suited to the task. For in contrast to the natural and social sciences, which demand that teacher and student put personal values aside for the sake of objectivity, the humanities impose no such requirement. They do not aspire to value-free knowledge. To the contrary, they address questions of value directly. They study human values as these have been expressed in one setting or another and invite—indeed, compel—students to engage these values themselves by asking whether they are sound and attractive. It is not enough for a student of philosophy to know that Plato held one view of justice and John Stuart Mill another. He must consider which, if either, to endorse himself. He must enter the conversation, join the debate, and take sides in it. He cannot put brackets around questions of value in order to preserve his objective detachment. The natural and social sciences require such detachment. Philosophy, literature, art, and the other humanities forbid it. They study the world of human values, but not from without. They study it from within and compel those who follow their path to decide where they stand in this world and why. As a result, the study of the humanities has an unavoidably personal dimension. It forces an engagement with intimate questions of meaning and touches on matters of identity and ultimate concern. Unlike the natural and social sciences, which lead away from the question of what living is for, the humanities lead irresistibly to it.

The humanities were themselves profoundly reshaped by the

research ideal. By the end of the nineteenth century, a growing number of humanities teachers in America's colleges and universities viewed themselves mainly as scholars, and the fruits of their research were impressive.⁴⁶ But there were others who continued to think of the humanities as a forum for exploring the meaning of life, not just as a body of knowledge to be transferred from one generation of specialists to the next, and it was to them that the responsibility for guiding this exploration now fell, after their colleagues in the natural and social sciences had given it up. They were the residual legatees of the older tradition to which all college teachers in America once belonged.



But even those humanities teachers who still believed in the importance of this tradition could not carry it forward unaltered. Too much had changed for that to be possible. The classics had lost their central place in the curriculum. Theology no longer provided a shared moral and spiritual perspective. The comforting assumption that science and faith are congruent had been exploded. And the conviction that there is a single right way of living for which a college education prepares its students was giving way to a more pluralist conception that acknowledges a diversity of fulfilling and honorable lives, distinct in their motivations and concerns.⁴⁷

All of these developments contributed to the culture of experimentation and doubt, of skepticism and adventure, that flourished in the last decades of the nineteenth century.⁴⁸ Its growth and increasing influence coincided with the emergence of the modern

university which was in many ways its institutional expression. By 1880, the world of the antebellum college had disappeared. For those teachers of the humanities who felt some loyalty to the traditions of the old regime and still believed they had a duty to guide their students in the search for an answer to the question of what ultimately matters in life and why, a new way of providing such guidance had to be found amidst the ruins of the old order, in a culture of skeptical pluralism that had no antecedent in American higher education.

Those who took up the challenge agreed on two basic points. The first was that the tendency toward specialization must be resisted. The purpose of a college education is not, they said, merely or even mainly to prepare students for their careers by conveying to them the specialized knowledge they need for their work. More fundamentally, a college must equip its students for the comprehensive challenges of life by giving them what Alexander Meiklejohn called a training in the general “art of living.”⁴⁹ A college’s first duty, he said, is to help its students acquire this art—not to equip them for the more limited responsibilities associated with a particular job.

Second, there was broad agreement that the humanities are the disciplines best suited to do this. Literary studies were thought particularly important in this regard. The study of literature, as we now understand it, was still something of a novelty in 1900. Before 1850, modern, vernacular literature had no place in the college curriculum. Only the classics were read, and they less as literature than as grammar texts and ethical guidebooks. By 1900, English literature had become a recognized field of study. Students were reading Wordsworth and Tennyson along with Homer and Virgil, and they were reading the classics themselves in a more literary spirit—as

works whose primary value lies in their “power to stimulate thought about life,” “to stir the emotions,” to “kindle the imagination.”⁵⁰ The study of literature, classical and modern, had become an important vehicle for training students in Meiklejohn’s art of living.

The same was true of philosophy. In the antebellum college, philosophy had been an adjunct to theology. Its main function was to indoctrinate—to provide argumentative support for religious belief. By the end of the nineteenth century, philosophy had declared its independence from religion and, partly in response to the characteristically American demand that speculative thought have practical value, become a less dogmatic discipline in which the various ways of playing what William James called “the total game of life” could be compared and assessed.⁵¹ It had become a testing ground for the examination of competing philosophies of life and the arguments that support them. Those who agreed with Meiklejohn’s definition of education as a “preparation for the art of living”⁵² saw in this new and more free-ranging style of philosophy another valuable means to provide it. The study of history, which supplies an organizing framework for the examination of man’s cultural achievements and helps bring these to bear in an orderly way on the central problems of life, seemed relevant to Meiklejohn’s goal as well.⁵³ Among the many specialized fields of study that now had a place in the university system, it was the humanities—literature, philosophy, history, and art—that still seemed most alive to the old, unspecialized question of how best to live.

Agreement on these two basic points, however, was accompanied by disagreement on many others. Some who accepted the general idea that a college education should be a preparation for life understood this goal in aesthetic terms, as the cultivation of a sen-

sibility that reacts with pleasure to beautiful things.⁵⁴ Others understood the goal more intellectually, as the mastery of a set of ideas. Some thought these ideas fit together in a harmonious way. Paul Elmer More insisted that the entire tradition of thought “from Plato to St. Chrystostom and beyond that to the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D., is essentially a unit and follows at the center a straight line.”⁵⁵ Others, like William James, believed that there is an eternal conflict between certain fundamental ideas, like those summarized under the headings of “idealism” and “materialism,” and that our endorsement of one or the other depends ultimately on considerations of “personal temperament.”⁵⁶ Some stressed the importance of character and well-roundedness as the goal of a humanistic preparation for life.⁵⁷ Others were more skeptical of these claims, in which they detected an inappropriately narrow, class-based conception, both of the goal and the best means to reach it.⁵⁸

The search for a way to sustain the older tradition of providing instruction in the meaning of life did not, therefore, result in a unified movement with common slogans and a single agenda. Woodrow Wilson expressed the goal one way when he said that what our colleges should seek to impart is “not so much learning as the spirit of learning.”⁵⁹ Irving Babbitt, the brilliant and belligerent Harvard professor of literature, put it differently when he declared that the most important thing “is humane selection, in other words a choice of studies that will reflect in some measure the total experience of the race as to the things that have been found to be permanently important to its essential nature.”⁶⁰ These were expressions not of a movement but a tendency, and even where the tendency prevailed the outcome was always shaped by the views of its local champions and the history and traditions of the school in question. The

Contemporary Civilization Course at Columbia (1919), the Humanities Course at Reed College (1924), Harvard's General Education Program (1946), the Directed Studies Program at Yale (1947): these and dozens of other curricular reforms were the product of a shared desire to see the question of how one should live kept at the center of undergraduate education and pursued in an organized way. But no two programs used the same words to describe their ambitions or prescribed the same course of study. Each was distinctive and followed a path of its own.

Yet despite their variety, most of these programs rested on several important (and today controversial) assumptions that went beyond the general idea that a student's education should be a preparation for life and that the humanities are the disciplines best equipped to provide it. Together these assumptions defined a philosophy of humanistic education. They defined its goal and the best means to reach it. This philosophy was never expressed in just the way I shall describe it here. I have gathered its elements from different sources and arranged them in an idealized fashion. But the ideal helps to explain how it was possible for many teachers of the humanities to continue to believe in their authority to guide their students in a search for the purpose and value of life, after the traditions of the antebellum college had fallen away.

I shall call this ideal "secular humanism." Others have used the name and given it different meanings.⁶¹ Some of these have implications I do not wish to endorse. But it is a good name nonetheless. For it underscores the single most important feature of the outlook I have in mind. This was the conviction that it is possible to explore the meaning of life in a deliberate and organized way even after its religious foundations have been called into doubt. In a culture of

deepening skepticism, secular humanism offered modest but real grounds for hope to teachers of the humanities who wanted to believe they still had the competence to lead their students in a disciplined study of the human condition and to help them locate their own personal search for meaning within it. For the better part of a century, secular humanism remained a source of inspiration—sometimes noticed, often not—for teachers who wanted to do this and who recognized that their efforts had to be based on something other than man’s well-understood relation to God.



Secular humanism was a response to two questions that teachers in the antebellum college never had to confront. The first arose as a result of the shift that took place in the decades following the Civil War (and partly on account of it) from a single, fixed conception of human fulfillment toward a more pluralistic view.⁶² Once we abandon the idea that there is a single right way of living and accept the notion that human beings can find different yet fulfilling answers to the question of what living is for, a new challenge arises. For now we must decide how wide the range of such answers can be and which ways of life it includes. More important, we must decide where to draw the line between the universal interests and concerns that all men and women share and those that are peculiar to a way of life organized around a particular set of values in which only some human beings find fulfillment.

The second question arose as a result of growing doubts about the role that God plays in the search for such fulfillment. To many

generations of American college teachers, it had seemed self-evident that a person's life can have meaning only if it is anchored in faith, in the loving and devoted acceptance of God's commands. In the increasingly skeptical culture of the late nineteenth century, this theocentric premise no longer seemed so obvious, to put it mildly. Doubts about the teachings of religion—about religion itself—multiplied and acquired a credibility that would have been hard to imagine a half-century before. These doubts spawned new and disturbing questions. Can a life without God have meaning? Can we supply, for ourselves, the meaning we want our lives to have? Or do we have spiritual needs, along with our material and social ones, that can only be met by a source of meaning outside ourselves, one we can never supply on our own? And if God is no longer available to play this role, who or what else is? What other sources of meaning might there be?

Humanities teachers who wanted to continue the tradition of offering instruction in the meaning of life in the age of the research university had to face and answer these questions. The philosophy of education they offered in response—the philosophy of secular humanism—rested on three assumptions.

The first was that pluralism is compatible with, indeed presupposes, the existence of a common human nature. There are facts of life we all confront and have no choice but to accept. There are needs we share and must satisfy in one way or another. We all die, and know we will, and must adjust ourselves to the shadow which the foreknowledge of death casts over the whole of our lives. We all hunger for love and recognition and a satisfying connection with others. These and certain other basic and immutable facts—that we are physical beings with recurrent bodily needs; that we possess the

capacity to form and use abstractions; that we are limited and yet relatively equal in our powers, so that cooperation among us is both possible and required; that we create laws and live in political communities; that we take pleasure in knowledge for its own sake—together fix the parameters of human living. They define the human condition. They limit our opportunities and choices—everywhere and always. Together, they provide a common foundation for the different ways of life in which human beings have at one time or another found a satisfying answer to the question of what living is for. There is no human life outside the boundaries they establish. In combination, they make us the kind of creature we are.

Other living things die, but only we are tormented or inspired by the knowledge that we will. Other creatures mate, and show affection, but only we hope for love. Some animals communicate, but none with language and laws. Some seem capable of learning, and of using what they learn to practical advantage, but only human beings delight in learning for its own sake. We inhabit a condition uniquely our own. It is something that all—and only—human beings share. The question of life's meaning arises for each of us only within the boundaries of this condition and in response to the distinctive combination of limit and transcendence it defines.

Secular humanism affirmed the existence of this shared condition. This was the first of its three core assumptions. If the humanities are to help us address the question of the meaning of life in a disciplined way, their first task must therefore be to identify the elements of our common human nature and to help us understand the consequences that flow from them. Their first task must be to acquaint us with our shared and fateful destiny as human beings.

A second assumption, and a second task, followed from the

acknowledgment of pluralism itself. For if human nature fixes our most elementary needs and establishes the limiting conditions under which these must be met, it also leaves room to fulfill them in a variety of ways, and even permits these needs themselves to assume different forms. The openness and plasticity of human nature are as impressive as its limits. Indeed, each of us can make, and wants to make, a life uniquely our own—a life that has no precise precedent in all the lives that have gone before and that will never be repeated exactly. Lives only look alike. If we knew more about them we would know that no two have ever been the same. Every birth is a new beginning of the world.⁶³ When we ask what living is for, we challenge ourselves to imagine the perfectly unique trajectory our lives might follow, unprecedented and unrepeatable in all of time.

But though the variations of human living are endless, they are not without pattern or form. There are certain patterns of life that have had a perennial attraction for human beings, living in the most diverse historical conditions. Each of these might be thought of as a template for living, subject to individual variation but offering a distinctive core of values, interests, and attitudes around which a fulfilling life can be arranged.⁶⁴ There is the life of the warrior, for example, and of the thinker, the artist, the lover, the scientist, the politician, the priest. Each has had its followers in every period and place. Their individual lives have of course been shaped in distinctive ways by contemporary habits and beliefs. Alcibiades is not Napoleon, and Plato is not Spinoza. Yet their lives are also recognizably linked, over immense periods of time and vast cultural divides, to the lives of others following the same pattern or path. When everything peculiar to the expression of a particular way of life at a given time and place has been removed, an enduring core remains.

Thinkers in all ages share certain values in common, as do warriors and politicians and priests. They share a set of beliefs and concerns that define a way of life with a unity that connects its diverse historical manifestations.

It is not clear how many such ways of life there are, nor is it clear whether they are merely different or antagonistic. The record of human experience suggests that their number is not large—certainly not infinite—and that their organizing values are, in certain cases at least, mutually exclusive and perhaps even hostile, for the basic commitments of some (the life of the warrior) appear to require the repudiation of those of others (the lives of the poet and lover). In broad terms, secular humanism accepts the pluralistic belief in a variety of paths to fulfillment; assumes their number to be modest but remains agnostic as to how many there are; and acknowledges that some ways of life are likely to be incompatible with others.

Thus if the first task of the humanities is to help us understand the common condition of mankind—the circumstances in which all human ambition unfolds—their second task is to identify and vivify the main lines into which the infinitely various individual expressions of this ambition have most often been channeled, to organize the tableau of our diversity. The humanities acquaint us with the core commitments of the different patterns of life that represent the most durable forms of human striving and explore the tensions among them, drawing from the storehouse of the past diverse examples that display each in its most compelling form. There is the life of Achilles, the brilliant brief life of battlefield honor and comradeship in arms; of Socrates, who put fidelity to philosophy before all else; the life of the prudent and measured man of practical virtue whose portrait Aristotle paints in the *Nicomachean Ethics*; of Augustine and

Paul, the convert who hears the word of God amidst the busy noise of the world; of Michelangelo, for whom the making of beautiful things was a kind of salvation; of Galileo, the scientist prepared to follow the logic of discovery wherever it leads; of Jane Austen's Emma, searching for happiness in the tangles of domestic life.

Each of these lives is oriented toward a distinctive set of ultimate cares. Each illustrates a pattern or model to which we may look in an effort to gain clarity about our own deepest commitments. Each represents a permanent possibility of living, in response to whose demands men and women in all ages have found fulfillment. Understanding these patterns can never eliminate the demand we make on ourselves to live a life that recognizes, honors, and expresses our own uniqueness. Nor can it ever by itself answer the question of what living is for. Nothing can ever convert this personal question into an intellectual one. But the humanities can give us the guidance we need to organize a response. They can provide us with landmarks on the landscape of life and help us frame our search, one by one as individuals, for an answer to the question. They cannot supply the answer itself but they can make the search for it more tractable, and that is a help of no small value.

This was the second key premise of secular humanism. Its third addressed the challenge posed by the weakening of religious belief as a starting point in higher education.

Teachers in the antebellum college had an answer to the question of life's meaning. Their confidence in the answer was anchored in a shared religious faith. By 1880, that faith could no longer be taken for granted. There were, of course, many who still believed in God, just as there were many who now doubted His existence and viewed religion with suspicion or contempt. But between these two

camps, of believers and skeptics, little common ground remained. A gulf had opened and was widening.⁶⁵ The only thing the two camps now shared was the question of whether it is possible for human beings to live lives of meaning in a godless world. Is it possible for men to establish, on their own, the meaning that their lives were once thought to possess on account of their location in a divinely ordered universe? The faithful said no, and insisted this can never be done. Skeptics said yes, and argued that human beings are able to provide for themselves what superstitious and ignorant men once believed only God can supply.

Secular humanism neither reaffirmed the religious dogmas of the old order nor embraced the most radical doubts of the new one. It refused to endorse the idea that human life has meaning only in a world created by God and directed toward His ends. But it also rejected the notion that we are able to create for ourselves, as individuals, whatever structures of meaning our lives require in order to have purpose and value. Instead, it emphasized our dependence on structures of value larger and more lasting than those that any individual can create. It stressed the need for individuals to locate themselves within these structures as a condition of their leading purposeful lives. This much secular humanism shared with the religious outlook of the old-time college. But it did not insist that these structures be eternal, like the ideas in God's mind. It accepted their mortality, and liability to decay, requiring only that they have a longer life than the lives of the individuals who are born into them and die out of them, one by one.

Nor did secular humanism imagine these more durable structures of meaning to be beyond the power of human beings to change or even, for that matter, to create and destroy. Indeed, it regarded

them as products of human creativity, subject to deliberate change by human beings and requiring their constant, caring attention to survive at all—unlike God’s plan for the world, which He creates and sustains without our help. But it also stressed that the creativity and care in question are the work of many hands, over long periods of time, the achievement of many human beings working together to establish and sustain something greater than anything any one of them can ever make on his or her own.⁶⁶

These structures do not transcend the realm of human things in the way that God transcends the world. They are products of human invention, made by men, changed by men, preserved only through human attention and toil. But they do transcend the life of the individual, and it is only within their wider frame of meaning that individuals can ever hope to lead lives of a meaningful kind. God may no longer be there to sustain us in our search for an answer to the question of what living is for. But in that search we cannot make do without enframing structures of value and significance that, as individuals, we lack the power to create on our own. To think we can is to arrogate God’s power to ourselves, to assume His self-sufficiency. Secular humanism did not require a God to give the world meaning. But it did insist that even if our faith in God has lost its force, we remain dependent for the meaning of our lives on structures of meaning that transcend our individual powers of creation and for whose existence the most appropriate attitude is therefore one of thanks.

There is, of course, more than one structure that satisfies this general requirement. For many people, their families and countries fulfill it. The structures of political and family life are of human origin and subject to decay. But they have a longer life than the lives

of their individual members. For countless human beings, in every age, their families and countries have provided the more durable framework of meaning that must be present, in some form, if the lives of those within it are to have any meaning at all.

Secular humanism did not discount the importance of any of these frameworks. But it did insist on the importance of one in particular, and the distinctiveness of secular humanism as a philosophy of education was a function, in large part, of the emphasis it placed upon this particular framework of meaning. I have in mind the long tradition of writing and reflection, and of artistic creation, that is still sometimes referred to as the tradition of European arts and letters. It was here, more than anywhere else, that secular humanism located the enduring yet temporal structures of value and purpose that are a condition of value and purpose at the individual level.

The tradition of arts and letters grew out of the earlier program of classical studies that had dominated American college education before the Civil War, but differed from it in content and purpose. The study of the classics is limited to Greek and Roman authors. The classical period is a bounded historical epoch and no new classical works will ever be composed (though a new one may occasionally be discovered). The tradition of arts and letters included the study of classical texts. But it also included the study of great medieval and modern works of European philosophy and literature as well—the writings of Dante, Chaucer, Petrarch, Cervantes, Descartes, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Milton, Kant, Hegel, and Goethe, among others. Most of these were composed in the still-living languages of Europe and belong to a tradition of writing that remains open today. New works continue to be written in these languages

and from time to time achieve a status comparable to theirs. Joyce's *Ulysses* and Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* are twentieth-century examples. The tradition of arts and letters thus has an openness that classical studies lacks and raises questions of a kind the classics alone cannot—most importantly, the question of how to understand the relation between the world of Greco-Roman antiquity, as reflected in its surviving works, and the very different world of modern European civilization. The expansion of arts and letters to include vernacular works of the modern period necessarily gave their study a living historical significance the classics alone can never possess.

The study of the classics in the antebellum college was essentially “conformist.” The purpose of studying the classics was to acquaint oneself with certain lasting models of thought and behavior and to develop the habits needed to apply these models in life: to conform oneself to them. Because of this, memorization and recitation seemed appropriate methods of teaching. When the field of arts and letters was widened to include modern materials as well, neither these methods nor the conformist goal that justified them could be sustained. For the student of arts and letters was presented not with a single model but two. On the one hand, there was the ancient model of virtue and order; on the other, modern ideas of individuality and creative freedom.⁶⁷ These ideals cannot easily be reconciled, and a student encountering them is bound to be impressed with the plurality of human values and experience. He is less likely to believe in the existence of a single, fixed model of life, to which he has only to conform his own habits and actions, and more likely to see himself as having some choice in the matter. He is more likely to see his own situation in historical terms—as the position of

a person in a long and evolving story, with twists and turns and new developments, and no end yet in sight. He is less likely to view himself as the acquiescent mimic of some finished form of life and more likely to see himself as a participant in an active, ongoing, unfinished process to which he may someday contribute something himself.

The tradition of arts and letters invited each student to see himself as a participant in what Michael Oakeshott memorably called a “great conversation.”⁶⁸ The student was encouraged to think of previous participants—poets, philosophers, novelists, historians, and artists—as addressing each other in a long, unbroken conversation about the most important matters in life, a conversation that has both the continuity and variability all real conversations possess. And he was taught to think of himself as a respectful but not subservient latecomer to this conversation, who has much to learn but also something to add. He was taught that he must study the great works of the past with attention and care, but not memorize them with a slavishness (as a defender of the tradition of arts and letters might have put it) inconsistent with the openness of this tradition itself and with the need for even the latest arrival to carry it forward and make it his own.

But open though it was, the tradition of arts and letters was most emphatically a tradition. It had central texts and abiding themes. It had a history and an internal life of its own. It could be taught in an organized way. It offered students a common set of references, a shared lexicon of works, and a fund of developed ideas with which to formulate their individual judgments and express them to others. It provoked, in the way that any living tradition does, a feeling of reverence for its previous contributors, a sense of responsibility for

protecting their achievements, and the experience of freedom in being able to build something distinctively one's own from these inherited materials.

For those who felt an allegiance to it, the tradition of arts and letters thus provided a more durable frame of reference within which to engage the question of life's meaning, without assuming this frame to be immortal or divine. It framed the question by locating the confrontation with it in a conversation longer and more lasting than anything any individual can ever produce on his own. In this respect, the tradition of arts and letters served the same function for its followers that the structures of political and family life serve for so many others. It provided them with the backdrop of meaning that must be present, in one form or another, if the individual's search for the meaning of his or her own life is to be sustainable at all, without relying on theological beliefs whose truth could no longer be assumed.

In the new university system that arose in the later years of the nineteenth century, teachers of the humanities were increasingly alone in their belief that they had the responsibility and competence to guide their students in an exploration of the value and purpose of life. They alone still felt a connection to the older tradition of college teaching in which this subject had had a central place. But the religious foundations of that tradition had been shattered beyond repair, and the classics no longer enjoyed the unquestioned primacy they once did. Accepting the need for some larger framework of meaning as a condition of the individual's search for fulfillment, while denying that only an eternal God can provide it, teachers of the humanities joined the study of the classics to more modern works of literature, philosophy, and art in a complex and

evolving tradition that forms a conversation of sufficient richness and strength to frame the student's search for an answer to the question of what living is for. This was the tradition of arts and letters whose spiritual vitality secular humanism affirmed. Shaped by a belief in the validity of the idea of human nature and by a confidence in the perennial significance of a limited number of exemplary types of human fulfillment, its study formed, for many years, the core of an educational program that enabled teachers of the humanities to meet their duties as residual legatees of the older tradition of offering instruction in the meaning of life, in colleges and universities now defined by specialization and in a culture marked by pluralism and doubt.



For roughly a century, from Charles Eliot's appointment as president of Harvard in 1869—a date as fitting as any to mark the birth of the new university system in America—to the watershed year of 1968, secular humanism continued to give credence to the idea that the question of life's meaning is one that can be taught. In the modified form that secular humanism gave it, the older tradition of offering such instruction survived for a hundred years, flickering and occasionally flaring, until it finally went out.

Today, increasingly few teachers of the humanities believe they have either the competence or duty to offer their students an education in the meaning of life. Even those who express this view in private are generally reluctant to do so in public. What they are likely to say instead is that the humanities are no better equipped

than other disciplines to provide organized help in the search for life's meaning; that it is not their special responsibility as teachers of the humanities to do so; and that college and university students, like the rest of us, must wrestle with this question on their own, outside of school, and without the illusion that any academic discipline can teach them how or what to think about it. A subject that was once, at the dawn of American higher education, a universal topic of instruction and later the special responsibility of the humanities, is thus today no longer taught even in these fields.

Beginning in the 1960s, and at an accelerating pace in the decades that followed, the principal tenets of secular humanism came under attack.⁶⁹ The idea that there is such a thing as human nature seemed increasingly implausible to many. In place of the older notion that there are enduring features of human existence that form the permanent framework of human experience and ambition, a new idea gained support—that any claim about human nature is an expression of power in disguise, an attempt by some to impose their will on others, not much different from a punch in the face. For the older belief that the principal patterns of human living are modest in number and steady over time, a new conviction took hold—that these patterns are innumerable and local to their place and period, making the appearance of historical continuity an illusion. And in sharp contrast to the tradition of arts and letters, a new attitude flourished—one that was hostile to the idea of a great conversation; that challenged its canonical selection of works; that emphasized the voices it excluded; and that insisted that the intellectual and artistic achievements of the West, to which the humanities have always paid special attention, are themselves the product of only one culture among many, no better or more interesting than the others that

human beings have created, a single thread in the multicultural skein of human experience and expression.

Together, these new ideas caused many humanities teachers to denounce what they saw as the pieties of secular humanism. By the end of the twentieth century, secular humanism had little more authority than the Christian classicism it replaced. Like its predecessor, it had come to seem just an article of faith.

Some attribute these developments to the turmoil of the 1960s and the resulting politicization of American academic life.⁷⁰ In these years, teachers, courses, and school policies all came under political scrutiny to an unprecedented degree. Existing practices were attacked as biased and unfair, and the traditional justifications for them denounced as “ideological.” Ideas came to be seen as camouflaged expressions of power, promoting a skepticism about truth and a relativism about values. The 1960s—so the story goes—converted truth to power and legitimated a relativism that compromised the authority of secular humanism in ways that have sapped the confidence of the humanities ever since.

There is some truth in this story. But there is a deeper truth that it fails to convey. For if the humanities had still been strong and self-confident disciplines in the 1960s, they would never have yielded as quickly and completely as they did to these destructive ideas. The politicization of the academy in the 1960s did not destroy the humanities. The humanities destroyed themselves by abandoning secular humanism in favor of the research ideal, which for a century and a half now has been gaining ground as the principal arbiter of authority and prestige in American higher education.

The humanities’ embrace of the research ideal compromised their sense of purpose and self-esteem by cutting them off from their

connection to the question of what living is for. It undermined the tradition of secular humanism that had given the question credibility in an age of skeptical pluralism. It left the humanities adrift and without direction and in their search for a new purpose and a new direction, many in the humanities welcomed the politically inspired ideas of the 1960s and the culture of political correctness that has plagued these disciplines ever since. They embraced these ideas in an effort to restore the special standing of the humanities and to repair the loss of authority brought about by the collapse of secular humanism. But in the process, they caused the humanities great harm, for the culture of political correctness that has dominated the humanities since the 1960s has not restored their authority but further compromised it instead.

This damage was not the result of an attack from without. It was not caused by barbarians crashing the gates. It was a self-destructive response to the crisis of authority that teachers of the humanities brought down on their own heads when they embraced the research ideal and the values associated with it. These values are the real enemy of secular humanism and the cause of its demise. They are the real source of the humanities' crisis of authority. For the modern research ideal, whatever its merits and however great its achievements, devalues the question of what living is for—the question to which the authority of secular humanism, and of the humanities generally, is uniquely and permanently tied.