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The Research Ideal

In 1918, the great social historian Max Weber delivered a lecture at Munich University titled "Scholarship as a Vocation."[1] It was one of his last and most passionate statements. In his lecture, Weber sought to describe the inner meaning of a scholarly career—its spiritual significance for the scholar himself. Toward the end, Weber's words rise to a near-religious crescendo as he struggles, with great feeling, to explain how a life of academic research can still be experienced as a calling, in the original sense of that word, in "our godless and prophetless time." But Weber begins on a more mundane note by surveying what he terms the "external" conditions of scholarly life in the German universities of his day. "What are the prospects," he asks, "of a graduate student who is resolved to dedicate himself professionally to scholarship in university life?" What are the conditions of his advancement and eventual success in the career that he has chosen?

The scholarly ideal that Weber describes is no longer a peculiarly German obsession. The production and dissemination of scholarship is today a central, organizing purpose of higher education

throughout the world. In the United States in particular, the research ideal has acquired a tremendous prestige. This is clearest in our large universities, which are consciously directed toward the production of research and whose teachers are appointed and promoted primarily on the basis of their scholarly achievements. But the pull of the ideal can be felt in our liberal arts colleges too and even in the country's community and other two-year colleges. Appointment to the faculty of any of these schools now generally requires the possession of a Ph.D. or other advanced degree that can be attained only in a research university with a graduate program.[2]

Graduate school is thus the common portal through which nearly all of America's college and university teachers now pass on their way to an academic career. It is the first stage of their professional lives, not just for a few devoted scholars but for all who choose a career in college or university teaching, at whatever level and whether or not they later engage in research themselves. It is in graduate school, therefore, that all but a few of America's college and university teachers are now introduced to the norms of the academic profession and where they first acquire an understanding of who possesses authority within the profession and why. As a result, our graduate schools, and the research universities that house them, exert an enormous influence on the values and expectations of young teachers. They are the nursery beds in which the professional habits of most of our college and university teachers are formed, and the attitudes they acquire there are carried with them to every corner, and level, of American higher education.

All graduate students learn certain lessons in common. They learn to think of their disciplines as distinct "fields" of study, each

occupying a limited place within a larger division of intellectual labor. They learn to view their fields as "specialities" that address different questions and employ distinctive methods to answer them. They are taught that each speciality has its own separate "literature" in which the knowledge of that field is contained; that the literature in each field is constantly being augmented and improved as new discoveries are made and fresh interpretations offered; that its "cutting edge" represents the latest and best thinking in the field; and that to become a professionally competent teacher of any subject one must "master" its literature and be able to appreciate the work done on its cutting edge.

Graduate students learn to restrict their attention to a single segment of human knowledge and to accept their incompetence to assess, or even understand, the work of specialists in other areas. But they also learn to accept the idea that this same narrowing of attention, which cuts them off from those in other disciplines, alone qualifies them to join the company of fellow specialists in their own field, spread over many generations and united in a common commitment to the subject they share. They are taught to understand that only by accepting the limits of specialization can they ever hope to make an "original contribution" to the ever-growing body of scholarship in which the fruits of research are contained. And finally, they are encouraged to regard the making of such a contribution as the greatest satisfaction an academic career has to offer, so that if they never publish an article or book but limit themselves to teaching instead, they are likely to feel that their professional lives, however fulfilling in other ways, have been of a lesser sort than those of scholars who have contributed something new to their fields. In

short, whatever their discipline, graduate students are taught to accept the limits of specialization and to see these as the price that must be paid for the powers and opportunities it affords.

In this regard, academic work is of course no different from any other. Specialization is today the ruling principle in nearly every productive activity. A young person considering a career of almost any sort faces the same need to find his or her place in a system of specialized labor. The division of intellectual labor within the academy is merely one expression of a much larger phenomenon that characterizes the modern world of work in its entirety. One might conclude that the principal motive for specialization in scholarly work is the same as it is everywhere else.

In *The Wealth of Nations,* Adam Smith uses the example of a pin factory to explain the advantages of specialization. These are, in his view, advantages of efficiency. Many more pins can be made at much less cost if those making them divide the labor amongst themselves, each concentrating on one aspect of the process only, instead of working in parallel fashion to produce whole pins from start to finish. "Each person," Smith says, "making a tenth part of forty-eight thousand pins, might be considered as making four thousand eight hundred pins in a day. But if they had all wrought separately and independently, and without any of them having been educated to this peculiar business, they certainly could not each of them have made twenty, perhaps not one pin in a day."[3]

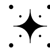
Smith's argument applies with equal force to the intellectual work of research and teaching. If each member of a college or university faculty studied and taught every subject instead of concentrating on a single field, the result would be the same as in the pin factory—a wasteful duplication of effort, a dramatic decline in

output, and a degradation in the quality of the work produced. Within the academy as outside it, more and better work can be done through specialization. This necessarily implies a narrowing of attention to some single aspect of a much larger whole, and if the loss of wholeness that results is thought to be dehumanizing (as Marx and others have suggested)[4] it is no greater for the academic worker than for the factory worker on an assembly line. And in both cases the loss is more than offset by a tremendous increase in efficiency that benefits not only the consumers (of knowledge or pins) but their producers as well, who are, after all, consumers of these and countless other things too.

This is a powerful argument, and it goes a long way toward explaining the division of labor that now exists in academic work—the "fate" of specialization, as Weber calls it, that graduate students must accept as the inescapable condition of their professional lives. But the modern system of specialized research is a result not merely of the drive for greater efficiency in the production of ideas. It is also the descendant of a spiritual ideal that was first self-consciously embraced by German scholars of the nineteenth century who understood their work to be a calling in the sense that Weber used that religiously charged term.

For them, the concept of an academic specialty and of the scholar's commitment to make an original contribution to his field were ideals deeply shaped by spiritual values. Today, the origins of these ideals are largely forgotten. Few young college and university teachers know anything of their history. Yet most still feel the vocational impulse that lay behind them. Most still experience their work as a calling. Most believe that the requirements of academic specialization are not merely a response to the demand for efficiency

but a way of answering the call that gives their work its personal meaning. Though compelled to bend to the logic of specialization, most graduate students do not think of themselves as assembly line workers like those in Adam Smith's pin factory. They believe they are responding to something deeper than the imperative to be efficient. And this belief, too, is a part of their devotion to the research ideal, and an important source of its commanding authority.



The modern research ideal is a creature of the nineteenth century. But scholarship, in the broad sense, is of course much older than that.

The humanist revival of letters in the fifteenth century and the Reformation in the sixteenth spurred a vast outpouring of new scholarly work.[5] Throughout Europe, learned scholars devoted themselves with increasing energy to the translation and interpretation of ancient texts, both secular and religious, and to the exploration of the historical, philosophical, and theological questions these raised. Erasmus is the outstanding example of the type.[6] In 1516, he published a nine-volume edition of the writings of St. Jerome and (that same year!) a critical edition of the New Testament in Greek and Latin. Others worked in a similar spirit, corresponding by letter and contributing to various fields of study.[7] Some organized groups to promote their efforts. In London, a "Society of Dilettanti" was established to support the classical scholarship of its members, men like Robert Wood, a widely traveled gentleman-scholar who served in William Pitt's government and wrote one of the eighteenth cen-

tury's most important books on Homer.[8] Nor was scholarship confined to humanistic and theological subjects. By the end of the eighteenth century, scientists were conducting experiments and reporting their results to an audience on both sides of the Atlantic. Franklin's experiments with electricity were closely followed in London and Paris.[9]

But before the nineteenth century, most scholars and scientists worked on their own, outside of any organized institutional setting. They typically owned their own books and laboratory equipment and supported themselves with income from a source unrelated to their scholarly endeavors. Ficino in the fifteenth century, Bacon in the sixteenth, Leibniz and Spinoza in the seventeenth are all examples of the type. The work of these scholars was, in the strict sense, "avocational"—something they pursued as a private passion, not a means of making a living, though it sometimes attracted the support of a wealthy patron (as in Ficino's and Leibniz's case).[10] And though a scholar might choose to concentrate on some particular area of research—on one text or author or scientific puzzle—most were generalists who remained interested in and competent to judge the work of those in related areas. Descartes made special contributions to the science of optics and invented analytic geometry, but he was involved in most of the important philosophical debates of his time.[11] Scholars of this older type were typically generalists who worked on their own. Their efforts were not coordinated through an agreed-upon division of labor managed by a centralized institution that paid their salaries and provided them with the means for conducting research—the situation of every college and university teacher today.[12]

The modern research system, in the form we know it now, had

its beginnings in the German universities of the early nineteenth century. There were, of course, related developments elsewhere. In 1795, the French established a National Institute to promote the production of knowledge aimed at advancing the goals of happiness and progress identified by the authors of the *Encyclopedia.*[13] It was the first institutionalized program of social scientific research. But it was in Germany that the new research ideal was articulated with the greatest clarity and where its adoption led to the establishment of the first modern research universities. And curiously, when this happened the impetus for it came not from the emergent social sciences or even, as one might have expected, from the natural sciences, but from the humanities, and from the field of classical studies in particular, where a new ideal of scholarship had taken hold in response to the changed conception of the field brought about by the romantic revolt against enlightenment rationalism.

Romanticism is a term of many meanings, but as applied to the earliest phase of German romanticism and to the writings of its two most influential figures, Gottfried Herder and his predecessor J. G. Hamann, it suggests above all else a determined opposition to the leveling tendencies of enlightenment thought, exemplified by the work of Voltaire and the French *philosophes.*[14] Voltaire had insisted on the uniformity of human nature and experience. He maintained that all men and societies, regardless of their location in historical time, are essentially alike. The differences among them, he said, are insignificant by comparison with the attributes they share. These constitute our common humanity, which reason by itself is competent to grasp. For Voltaire and those who shared his views, the homogeneity and rational intelligibility of human affairs were arti-

cles of faith, the two related principles on which their enlightened rationalism was based.

Herder and Hamann attacked these claims with ferocity. They argued that Voltaire's rationalism underestimates the differences that distinguish one culture from another. They insisted that Voltaire and his followers had exaggerated the power of reason to comprehend and appreciate these differences. In opposition to those who deny their importance, Herder and Hamann attached supreme significance precisely to these differences themselves. What is most interesting and valuable in a culture or period, they said, is its distinctive personality—the practices, beliefs, and works that give it a unique identity—and not the general traits it shares with every other. Voltaire had equated our humanity with mankind's common nature. The Romantics turned this equation upside down and made the individuality of a people or age the mark of its humanity.

The distinctive personality of a period or culture is of course always shaped by fateful circumstances of geography, weather, and the like. Following Montesquieu, Herder gathered these under the general heading of "climate."[15] But the true significance of a culture, he said, is less a function of the climatic conditions that shape its way of life than of a people's inventive response to them. And that response, Herder insisted, is always something unique—the soul of a culture's character and the source of its meaning and value.

The same is true of individual human beings. Each of us is born to particular parents in a particular social setting and endowed with gifts and disabilities not of our own choosing. Then, through imagination and effort, we make of these conditions—the climate of our lives—personalities whose value lies, from a romantic point of view,

in their freely formed uniqueness. This idea has sometimes been expressed by the thought that a person's life is a work of art.[16] Just as an artist begins his creative work with materials he has not invented but finds already at hand, so we begin our lives with opportunities and limitations we have no choice but to accept. And just as an artist strives to make something singularly expressive of his materials, we work to fashion distinctive lives out of the conditions that determine our natal fate. The product is in each case something unique—a work of art, a life—whose value lies in its distinctiveness and whose distinctiveness is the result of a free and creative imagination working on materials that are neither distinctive nor free.[17]

Herder and Hamann endorsed this idea. They agreed that the value of a person's life lies in the distinctive shape he gives it through his creative adaptation to the given circumstances of his existence. And (like Vico before and Dilthey after)[18] they thought this principle applies not just to individuals but to whole ages and civilizations. Each age, they said, ought to be considered a work of art too—the product of a long, imaginative campaign to infuse its given, "climatic" conditions with an expressive personality whose relative value, like that of any artistic creation, must be judged by the singularity and beauty of the result.

For centuries, classical studies had enjoyed a special prestige in Germany and Europe generally. The classics were thought to provide timelessly valid standards of conduct and taste and were assumed to define a permanent pattern of right living, as accessible and authoritative today as in the past. The late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century classicists who were influenced by the romanticism of Herder and Hamann no longer looked at their subject in this way. For them, the classics were not a set of permanently valid

norms, to be learned and copied by their modern readers—the once-and-for-all best statement of how men ought to live—but were the products of a unique civilization, now irretrievably gone, that could be studied but not reproduced. The task of the scholar, as they saw it, is to grasp the unique identity of the civilization these characteristics reflect. For the greatest classical scholars of the period—like F. A. Wolf,[19] whose philological research laid the foundation for all modern studies of Homer—the romantic belief in the value of the individual was fundamental. It was the premise on which their new conception of scholarship was based. It reoriented their work and redefined the special prestige of their field, which henceforth was to be explained not by the timeless validity of the norms of the classical world but by the outstanding beauty and utter singularity of their expression.

This new, romantically inspired view had a revolutionary effect on the field of classical studies. It encouraged a more historical approach to the subject, placed greater weight on the knowledge of facts, and put the possibility of ever knowing the classical world as a whole forever beyond reach.

If we want to understand what makes the life of a human being unique, we need to study his biography—his distinct and unrepeatable career in time. It is not enough to know the general ways in which his life resembles that of others. In addition, we must know and understand the course of events that sets his life apart—the accidents and experiences that distinguish it from other lives. The same is true of cultures. If they are individuals with their own distinctive personalities, they too must be studied biographically. We can understand the uniqueness of a period or culture only by studying the trajectory of its movement in time, for the same reason

that we can grasp the uniqueness of an individual's life only in this way. The more one stresses the significance of a (person's or age's) individuality, the more one is bound to feel the need for a dynamic (biographical or historical) view of it.

The classicist view of antiquity was essentially static. It paid little or no attention to its historical development. By attaching the importance it did to individuality, romanticism encouraged a more dynamic view of the ancient world. The meaning and value of that world were now seen to reside not in a set of timeless forms, transparent to the intellect and permanently available as standards of judgment, but in its movement along the arc of a unique career in time. Nowhere was this shift of orientation clearer than in the field of philology, where Wolf and others labored to reconstruct the linguistic genealogy of Homer's poems and other classical texts.[20]

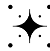
The shift from a static to a historical conception of the ancient world in turn demanded an increased attention to facts. To write the biography of a person, one must be acquainted with the facts of that person's life. Ideas alone are insufficient. The uniqueness of a person's life cannot be grasped apart from the facts that make it distinctive. A biographer of course needs ideas too. An assemblage of facts without organizing ideas has no significance at all. But for a biographer, facts have a relevance and value they can never have so long as one believes that the worth and interest of a life is measured by its conformity to some abstract, timeless pattern of conduct. The same is true if one is writing the biography of a culture or period. Here, too, facts have a relevance they lack on a classicist view. Classicism assumes that the timeless values of the past can be expressed in the form of general ideas that we are able to grasp by reason alone. If instead one wants to understand what is distinctive about a culture

or period, one needs to know the facts of its biography. A romantic emphasis on the value of the individual demands a historical approach to the subject, which in turn requires a heightened attention to facts, reversing the order of importance that classicism had assigned to facts and ideas.

This insistence on the importance of facts had the further consequence of making a complete knowledge of the classics unattainable. For if the works of the classical authors are conceived as facts, as one set of data among others (archeological, numismatic, etc.), all of which must be weighed and interpreted in an attempt to understand the unique career of the classical world, then no perfect mastery of them, or of the relevant facts generally, can ever be achieved. One can never get to the bottom of a single fact, let alone a limitlessly expanding set of facts. Facts are inexhaustible. It is always possible to see something new in them that has not been seen before. That is true even where the facts are fixed. But if fresh facts are constantly coming to light, and show every sign of continuing to do so without limit, the first infinity (of each fact taken by itself) is augmented by a second (of the endless series of facts awaiting discovery). Only ideas are fully comprehensible. Hence only so long as the classics are conceived as a collection of generalized norms is the goal of acquiring an exhaustive knowledge of them a goal that can be reached in a finite period of disciplined study.

Romantic individualism exploded the closed world of classicism with its limited number of comprehensible ideals and replaced it with an infinite universe of facts that can never be exhausted or perfectly explained.[21] In doing so it put the goal of a complete understanding of antiquity forever beyond reach, beyond the furthest horizon of the greatest knowledge any person can ever acquire.

This became the premise on which all classical scholarship was henceforth to be based. To those in the field, this presented a novel challenge. How was their work to proceed on these new assumptions? The modern research ideal evolved in response.



Given the infinity of facts now potentially relevant to an understanding of the classical world, formulating a method to guide their exploration now became imperative. Only a set of rules for determining the relative importance of different facts, of interpreting their meaning, and of assembling these interpretations into a coherent scheme could provide the direction needed to find one's way about in an infinitely large universe of possibilities. Without a method, one was condemned to wander aimlessly. The increasing insistence in classical studies on the importance of agreed-upon methods of research; the long campaign to formulate these methods and to police their application by insisting that they alone can generate "meaningful" results; the increasing attention paid to methodological issues of all sorts: these were a predictable, indeed inevitable, response to the challenge of making the now infinite material of classical studies accessible to the finite minds of its students and of transforming what would otherwise be a trackless forest into a manageable plot.

Furthermore, since every scholar now confronted a limited number of possible lines of inquiry to which he might devote his time and energy, a selection obviously had to be made among them. Nothing could be gained by flitting aimlessly from one topic to the

next, and all the possible topics could never be exhausted. The explosion of the boundaries of classical studies thus compelled a process of specialization. By devaluing the knowledge of the generalist, who was concerned only with abstract ideals, the romantic insistence on the value of the individual forced scholars to become specialists whose deep but limited understanding of some selected portion of the vast range of materials one might usefully investigate was now deemed the only true, authentic, and worthwhile knowledge a person could possess about the subject.

Finally, classical studies (and, by implication, every branch of specialized research) now had to be viewed as an accretive enterprise extending over many generations of time. For even if he narrows his focus to a single topic, no scholar can hope to grasp it fully in his lifetime. His subject matter is endlessly rich and can never be exhausted. This would be true even if his material consisted of a few well-defined facts, since even a single fact can be made to yield additional knowledge when inspected from a fresh point of view. And of course the narrowest research agenda consists of numberless facts and countless interpretive possibilities. Every field of research, however specialized, is therefore infinitely deep, and hence incapable of being fully explored in the finite span of a single human lifetime.

The acknowledgment that this is so forced those who accepted the new scholarly ideal of specialized work to recognize that their goal can only be achieved by many generations of scholars. It compelled them to acknowledge that their work can, in truth, *never* be completed and that the notion of its completion is what Kant called a "regulative ideal"—a goal which, though unattainable, gives purpose and direction to the effort to reach it.[22] Those who embraced the idea of specialization were thus required to view themselves as

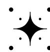
participants in a timeless endeavor, governed by a regulative ideal toward whose achievement they might contribute but which they could not reach themselves within the limits of their own mortal careers.

This made it necessary for scholars working in accordance with the new research ideal to find a stable institutional home for their endeavors. The more specialized their research became, the greater was the need for a coordinating mechanism of some sort to bring their work into alignment and to gather their separate discoveries into an organized whole. And the more the work of scholarship came to be viewed as a multigenerational enterprise reaching over a limitless span of time, the more urgent was the need for an enduring institutional setting to provide a link between the generations, preserving the work of each as a capital asset for those that follow. As the research ideal gained authority, and more of those working in classical studies and other fields came to accept its demands, it became increasingly clear that their work could be pursued only in universities—in institutions set up, or redesigned, for the very purpose of providing these links.

Scholars of earlier generations had sometimes enjoyed the support of a patron. More often, they supported themselves with their own resources. Many were wealthy men for whom scholarship was a hobby. Like Robert Wood, they were "dilettantes" who pursued their studies in large part for the sake of the pleasure these afforded. The nineteenth-century German research scholars who worked in the universities that had been created to coordinate their efforts and to provide a stable home for their disciplines approached their task in a different spirit. Their goal was not the cultivation and enjoyment of a refined connoisseurship, as it had been for many scholars

of the older type. They did not work for the sake of pleasure, however refined. They worked to advance the state of knowledge in their fields, for whose sake many were prepared to *sacrifice* their happiness—their health, hobbies, family relations, and the like.[23] They approached their work in professional terms, distinguishing (with a sharpness earlier scholars had not) between the objective interests of their disciplines and their own private needs, viewing the latter as a resource to be spent in pursuit of their discipline's goals.

In this respect, their attitude resembled that of two other groups whose historical emergence coincided roughly with their own. One was the class of professional bureaucrats who in the nineteenth century took over many of the administrative responsibilities of the modern nation state, performing their tasks in a similar spirit of self-denying devotion to office.[24] The other was the class of capitalist entrepreneurs whose defining ambition was not to increase their private wealth but the profitability of their businesses instead.[25] Like the bureaucrat and the capitalist, the professional research scholar who emerged as a recognizable type in the German universities of the early nineteenth century worked not for his own sake but for the benefit of the discipline to which he belonged, distinguishing its interests from his own with a clarity foreign to the tradition of learned scholarship that for centuries had been the main carrier of most forms of knowledge in the West.



It may seem surprising that romanticism produced these results. For the spirit of romanticism, with its passion and extravagant self-

expression, seems far removed from the cool and self-sacrificing spirit of the new scholarly ideal. But it was the romantic affirmation of individual uniqueness—the heart of its revolt against enlightenment rationalism—that created the conditions that gave birth to this ideal with its requirements of specialization and professional restraint. However distant in affect or tone, the modern research ideal is the professionally disciplined child of its hot-blooded parent.

From the field of classical studies, this ideal spread to other areas of historical research, to medicine and the natural sciences, and to the nascent social sciences which began to assume their present form in the middle years of the nineteenth century. Slowly but steadily, its dominion expanded over the whole of academic life. In the process, the new research ideal acquired an increasingly "vocational" cast. The career of the research specialist came to be seen as a calling in the original sense of that term. It came to be viewed not merely as a means to the more efficient production of knowledge but as a path to a spiritual end, a path (to put it most extravagantly) to salvation. This happened first and most emphatically in the German universities of the nineteenth century. It was here that the new ideal of specialized research, born in the field of classical studies, first acquired the moral and spiritual significance it still possesses today, through its interaction with a larger complex of ideas centered around the uniquely German concept of *Bildung*.

The word itself implies a process of self-cultivation, of inward development, that Thomas Mann in 1923 called "the finest characteristic of the typical German."[26] Mann assigned this characteristic a high spiritual value and believed that a form of personal salvation may be found in its achievement. In this regard, he echoed the views of other German writers—of Goethe in the eighteenth century,

Schleiermacher, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche in the nineteenth, Freud and Weber in the twentieth. The value of Bildung was a central organizing premise of the literary and philosophical tradition to which all these writers belonged and of which Mann himself was one of the last great representatives.[27]

Different writers in this tradition interpreted the concept differently. But during the century and a half that the ideal of spiritual self-cultivation associated with the notion of Bildung remained a premise of German culture and thought, specialized academic research continued to be viewed as one of its most characteristic expressions. The professor working in his study on some arcane and specialized problem of research, devoting himself at great personal cost to the advancement of knowledge in his field: here the defenders of Bildung saw a striking example of the values and attitudes they most respected. For them, the work of scholarship was more than a form of productive labor. It was a calling with salvific goals that embodied the highest spiritual values of the civilization to which this distinctively German idea gave expression.

Two features of the Bildung ideal meshed in an especially close and supportive way with the requirements of specialized academic research and help to explain why it acquired the vocational meaning it did. The first was an insistence on the one-sidedness of all responsible self-cultivation. Every human being is born with powers he or she shares with other members of the species. But no one person can develop these to full expression. Life is too short for that. And though we each possess certain universal aptitudes and inclinations, we do not possess them all to the same degree. Every human being is a unique bundle of capacities, interests, and traits. The distinctiveness of a person's talents and inclinations is fixed in part by nature

and in part by early experience. But whatever relative weight we assign these two great determining influences in a person's life, by the time he reaches the stage at which the question of what he shall make of himself can be meaningfully framed, the specific gifts (of nature and nurture) on which his efforts of self-cultivation must be trained will already for the most part be fixed, and it is on these that the ethic of Bildung requires him to concentrate his attention.[28]

To aim at a universal humanity that encompasses the whole of mankind's powers is not only fruitless, and hence imprudent, but self-indulgent as well. What one must do instead is develop to their fullest the distinctive talents one possesses, leaving it to others to develop theirs in turn. One should think of oneself as having been assigned a part in a larger drama and as having a duty to play that part with the greatest possible refinement and skill. One should not seek to master the play as a whole. The ancient Aristotlean ideal of well-roundedness must be rejected as both impractical and immoral.[29]

In contrast to the pagan ideal of a well-rounded life, the notion of Bildung assigned supreme moral value to the uniqueness of the individual and to the development of his or her distinctive gifts for the sake of a greater good. It encouraged those who embraced it to see the cultivation of their individuality as a moral responsibility. In this respect, it drew upon the Christian belief in the sanctity of the individual, of which the concept of Bildung was in many ways a secularized expression.[30] It preserved the spiritual power of this Christian idea in a secular form, as an innerworldly ideal of living, without the theological assumptions on which it had originally been based—much like the concept of life as a work of art, which defenders of the Bildung ideal often treated as its equivalent.

It is easy to see how this ideal fit with the new conception of scholarly research and lent spiritual dignity to it. Scholarship demands specialization, a narrowing of effort and attention. This makes all serious scholarship one-sided. That we have each been given our assignment in life and must work to make the most of it is what the notion of Bildung counsels as a general ideal of living. For the research scholar, this means that the development of his expertise is not merely efficient but morally praiseworthy too. The concept of Bildung encourages the equation of scholarly specialization with duty and honor. It makes the development of one's place in the division of intellectual labor a spiritually meaningful goal and not just an economic or organizational necessity. It condemns all efforts to achieve a complete, well-rounded knowledge of the world as pointless and irresponsible. It promotes the idea that in collaboration with others, the specialist can contribute to the development of human knowledge and to the cultivation of humanity in general. The concept of Bildung connects the work of the academic specialist to this larger ideal of living, invests it with redemptive significance, and gives him a framework within which to see his work as part of a larger program that embodies humanity's deepest aspirations.

The Bildung ideal helped secure the spiritual dignity of the research ideal in a second way, by emphasizing the disinterestedness of the process of self-cultivation. A cultivated person may, of course, enjoy the capacities he or she has worked to develop. But this is not the end toward which the person's energies are bent, as the Bildung ideal conceives it. The talents we possess have not been given to us for our private enjoyment. We have been given them to develop for the benefit of humanity as a whole. We have been entrusted with a small but distinctive portion of humanity's resources and charged

with the responsibility of cultivating them on humanity's behalf. The attitude we take toward our own talents and capacities must therefore not be one of selfish pleasure. It should be the attitude of a trustee who is responsible for making the most of the corpus he or she has been instructed to manage for the benefit of those others whose enjoyment is the trustee's only legitimate object.

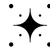
This aspect of the Bildung ideal was also deeply colored by Christian belief—by the belief that as unique components of God's diverse creation we have an obligation to help complete His work by developing the gifts that He has given us, not so that we may enjoy them ourselves but in order to glorify God and fulfill His plan for the world.[31] Christianity teaches that we are not the owners but merely the possessors of our gifts, which belong to someone else for whose sake we must manage their development. Here too the concept of Bildung functioned as the secular equivalent of a religious idea, preserving a Christian ethic of trusteeship without its theological trappings and bringing its vocational spirit of other-directed service into the worldly labor of self-cultivation.

In this way, the Bildung ideal helped to give spiritual legitimacy to the culture of academic professionalism that was associated with the new university-based system of specialized research. Unlike the scholars of an earlier day, who often worked for the sake of their own gratification, the research specialist subordinates his personal well-being to the advancement of knowledge in his field. He accepts the demands of specialization not merely for the sake of efficiency, but out of a sense of duty, believing that he must eschew the pleasures of dilettantism in order to meet his responsibilities as a steward of the one small plot of knowledge that has been entrusted to his care. From this morally demanding point of view, the scholar who pur-

sues his studies for the sake of the pleasure they afford him is acting in a selfish and irresponsible way. He is putting himself before others. Only the scholar who accepts the requirements of specialization and the personal sacrifice these entail, who distinguishes the needs of his discipline from his own private welfare and subordinates the second to the first, is acting in a morally praiseworthy fashion. Only he is acting in accordance with the self-denying ethic of trusteeship that the Bildung ideal embodies.

The Bildung ideal made specialization a virtue. It made the dutiful renunciation of pleasure for the sake of responsible work a spiritually compelling demand. Drawing inspiration from an older tradition of Christian belief while recasting that tradition in a secular form, it conferred a moral and spiritual legitimacy on the work of the academic researcher whose selfless and specialized labors the Bildung ideal dignified as a calling not a job—an innerworldly path to salvation. The result was a spiritualization of the research ideal that persists to this day. Even today, most American graduate students believe they have chosen a path that offers more than external rewards. They believe they are embarking on a career that promises a measure of spiritual fulfillment as well. Max Weber was the last to express this idea with the moral grandeur in which it had originally been conceived by the German scholars of the early nineteenth century who grafted onto the new regime of specialized research spurred by the romantic reaction against enlightenment rationalism an ideal of self-cultivation derived from Christian beliefs but trimmed of religious assumptions. Today, few graduate students read Weber's 1918 lecture. Fewer still have any knowledge of the intellectual developments that produced the modern research ideal, with its demand for specialization and insistence on the spiritual

dignity of a life devoted to it. But the implicit acceptance of these ideas remains an important if hidden source of the vast authority of the research ideal in American higher education—an authority that flows not only from its efficiency in the production of ideas but its moral potency as well.



The several thousand Americans who went to Germany to study in the middle years of the nineteenth century brought back with them a German passion for scholarship and the vocational ideal of a life devoted to specialized research.[32] When this ideal began to take root in America's universities, however, it was not in the humanities that it gained its first foothold—in contrast to the situation in Germany—but in the natural sciences instead. Several reasons help to explain this. One was the absence in the United States of a strong secondary school system of the sort that existed in Germany and that guaranteed a steady supply of college students already well-trained in the classics.[33] Another was the continuing influence of an older approach to these texts, which treated them as manuals of moral instruction rather than as objects of research. And a third was the characteristically American emphasis on the importance of "useful" knowledge, to which research in the natural sciences makes a more visible contribution.

The humanities, and classical studies in particular, thus proved to be a relatively less congenial medium for the initial transplantation of the German research ideal to American soil.[34] It was in the natural sciences that this ideal established its first American beach-

head. But from here it quickly spread to other fields and by the end of the nineteenth century had penetrated every branch of study. The humanities were no exception. In philology, history, and other fields the new ideal of scholarly research attracted American followers who were eager to reorganize their disciplines in accordance with its requirements.[35] But in the humanities—and there alone—the research ideal met a counter-ideal whose deepest values were in many ways antithetical to its own. This was the ideal of secular humanism, which remained a powerful force in the humanities until the middle years of the twentieth century, when it finally lost its authority as a serious competitor to the research ideal.

Secular humanism was the heir of the classicist tradition that had dominated every aspect of American college life before the Civil War. It modified that tradition in important ways but shared certain core values with it. The research ideal attacked these values directly. It made them seem unworthy of respect. And in doing so, it displaced from a central and respected place in higher education the question to which both the classical program of the antebellum college and secular humanism were addressed—the question of what living is for.

Students in an antebellum college were expected to internalize a fixed and finite set of norms inherited from the ancient world and from Christian tradition and to conform their actions and speech to them. The students who acquired these values assumed the place that generations of students before them had occupied. They repeated their experience. They neither expected to make progress beyond what their predecessors knew and believed nor were encouraged to do so. They did not seek to be original. The whole point of their education was to become *un*original by learning the pattern of

living that men whose hearts and minds are properly ordered have always followed. Their attitude was not one of active invention but of submission to the authority of values that they were not to embellish, change, or stamp with their own distinctive personality but merely absorb and embrace.

This attitude was shared by their teachers. Teachers in the antebellum college saw themselves as the conservators of a valued tradition of learning. Their principal duty was to preserve this tradition by initiating the next generation of students into its pantheon of norms and ideas. A teacher in the classicist mold had no ambition to make a contribution of his own to this tradition. He had no desire to impress his personality upon it. His aim was the essentially passive one of transmission, and the gratification that his work provided derived from the experience of serving as a link in an unbroken chain, as a custodian helping to preserve a great human achievement. This attitude is today nearly incomprehensible. But the knowledge that he will die out of a world recognizably the same as the one he entered (a source of immense psychic comfort); the experience of having done his part to keep this world intact; the joy of being immediately in touch with those earlier generations of teachers who had labored before him in the same project of preservation—all the satisfactions of trusteeship, in short—were for teachers of the old order benefits more real and vivid than the pleasures of originality, which they hardly recognized at all.[36]

The modern research ideal turned this older system of values upside down.

The goal of a teacher oriented to scholarship is not to transmit unchanged an existing body of knowledge he has inherited from the past. The scholar's goal is to add something new to the storehouse of

knowledge he finds in place when he begins his own research. The novelty he adds need not be grand. Every scholar hopes for this, of course, but the failure to have a transforming effect on his field does not mean that the scholar's research has been in vain. The crucial achievement—without which his efforts really would be in vain—is the contribution of some incremental discovery or invention of his own, however small the contribution may be in comparison to what others have done.

The research scholar who succeeds in contributing to her field experiences something that teachers in the classicist tradition neither experienced nor sought. She experiences the excitement of her own creativity, the thrill of originality. But the conditions on which she does so necessarily deprive her of the satisfaction of knowing everything one needs to know—perhaps even everything that can be known—about her subject. So long as classicism retained its vitality, this remained an attainable goal. But by attaching such importance to originality, and by making specialization the inescapable condition of original scholarship, the research ideal puts this goal beyond reach. It makes it seem laughably naive. The scholar who would be original must concentrate her efforts on a single, specialized point of research and abandon the childish pretense of ever attaining that entire knowledge of the world and of humanity to which all learning in the classicist tradition aspired.

The research scholar is also deprived of the satisfaction of being directly in touch with his predecessors, intellectually and morally, and of sharing with them a vantage point that never changes. The point of instruction in the antebellum college was to equip each student to join his ancestors as a contemporary, standing alongside them in the possession of a common knowledge that is always the

same. The pleasure of such contemporaneity was one of its chief goals. The modern ideal of scholarly research substitutes for this what might be called an "ethic of supersession."[37] A scholar does not aim to stand where his ancestors did. His goal is not to join but supersede them and his success is measured not by the proximity of his thoughts to theirs but by the distance between them—by how far he has progressed beyond his ancestors' inferior state of knowledge.

By the same token, the ethic of supersession demands that the research scholar acknowledge, even relish, the prospect that his own original contribution will be superseded in turn. Psychologically, perhaps, this is more difficult to accept than the exciting prospect of advancing beyond those who have gone before. But no one who is truly called to scholarship as a vocation can justify the (understandably human) desire to utter the final word on a subject. For a true scholar, this desire must seem a bit of foolish pride. The true scholar wants to be superseded by his successors, just as he wants to supersede those who have preceded him. He seeks originality, but accepts the transience of his own original achievements.

Teachers in the old order saw themselves as participants in an unchanging venture. They stood with their ancestors in what Max Weber called the "eternal yesterday" of tradition.[38] In doing so, they achieved a position immune to the corrupting powers of time. They experienced a kind of immortality, directly in their own lives and within the limits of their own experience. One might say that they enacted the idea of eternity in their lives. For the research scholar, this experience is no longer available. A scholar of course thinks of himself as a participant in a timeless venture too—in his discipline's unending pursuit of perfect knowledge—and identifies with the

immortal life of the discipline as a whole. But this life consists in a perpetual series of supersessions, of which his own career is one, and though a scholar can conceive the idea of a timeless project formed of such a series, he cannot experience it directly. He can imagine himself to be part of an eternal enterprise, but cannot realize its timelessness within the bounds of his finite existence. For the research scholar, eternity is just an abstraction and though he may be consoled by the thought of his participation in a venture whose goal of perfect knowledge lies beyond time's power to change, he can never know the greater consolation of reaching this goal in his lifetime, of experiencing eternity directly as opposed to merely contemplating it as an ideal.

Teachers in the old order faced death knowing what eternity is like. They confronted death from the standpoint of an experience that was already beyond it. The research scholar faces death without the consolation of this experience. For him, death casts a more disturbing shadow. Death makes the meaning of his work more insecure, easier to question and doubt. It makes the scholar's life lonelier—which is why some, like Weber, have seen the scholarly vocation as a heroic ideal demanding a form of courage that classicism never required.

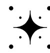
It is indeed heroic for a scholar to forge on, for the sake of truths he will never reach and without the consolation of that living experience of immortality that teachers of the old order knew and which for them made death a less significant event. But it is the scholar's own ethic of supersession that shuts him out from this experience and deprives him of its consolation. It is the scholar's own insistence on the importance of originality that compels him to acknowledge

the transience of his work, that deprives him of the experience of eternity in the deathless company of his ancestors, and leaves him facing death alone and unconsoled. If specialization is a price that must be paid for originality, then loneliness is too.

The student who approaches his subject in this spirit, and pursues it beyond its first introductory phase, will see the main purpose of his study as being to acquire the resources he needs to make a creative contribution of his own. His goal will be to supersede the achievements of his teachers by adding something new to their discoveries. He will regard the advance of his own work beyond that of his teachers as a fulfillment of their relationship, as the highest form of fidelity he can show to those who have introduced him to the field—which is how his teachers will view it too, so long as they remain faithful to their scholarly vocation and are not distracted by egoistic concerns.

The further a student moves in this direction, the more reconciled she will become to the necessity for specialization as a condition of original research, and to the transience of her own work as an unavoidable consequence of it. Like her teachers, she will come to accept the impossibility of ever possessing all the knowledge in her field or of joining her ancestors in the eternal now of a deathless wisdom that each generation inherits complete from the ones before. She will accept all this, and the loneliness it entails, so long as she makes originality her guiding star. She will know that these ambitions were once pursued by teachers and students in an educational milieu far removed from her own. But she will recognize that their satisfactions must all be foregone for the sake of that ever-expanding storehouse of knowledge, built over many generations through the specialized labor of countless creative researchers, each

adding his or her own original but short-lived bit to the growing pile, to which she hopes herself to make a contribution: the heart of the research ideal.



Secular humanism was more pluralistic than the classicism of the antebellum college. It was more skeptical of the theological certitudes on which the latter was based. It recognized, as classicism did not, that the question of what living is for is one we must each answer for ourselves. Yet it also shared certain important values with the tradition to which it succeeded. These shared values formed a link between them and enabled secular humanism to carry that tradition forward. But the values they shared, which made this continuity possible, were the very ones the research ideal attacked.

Like the classicist tradition, secular humanism also assigned a positive value to recurrence and repetition. While emphasizing the plurality of the answers that can be given to the question of what one should ultimately care about and why, it stressed the stability of these answers over time. It presented them as a relatively permanent set of possibilities, the more-or-less fixed framework within which each individual confronts the question of what living is for. A choice must be made among these possibilities. They do not dictate the answer by themselves. But because the framework they establish is unchanging, teachers in the secular humanist tradition could see themselves as the guardians of an educational program that remains unoriginal in each generation, much as their classicist forebears had done.

They could also experience a communion with the great creative spirits of the past and seek to bring their students into this communion themselves. The life of philosophy has never had a greater champion than Socrates or the life of faith a more impassioned and articulate defender than Augustine. For the secular humanist, Socrates and Augustine are contemporaries. They and all the other great thinkers and artists of the past occupy the same changeless if quarrelsome space, endlessly debating the meaning of life in a single unbroken conversation, where new points may be scored but no answer is ever refuted—a conversation that is always alive, where every participant who has ever joined it is still actively engaged, and to which each new generation of students is introduced, meeting their ancestors face-to-face in a direct encounter regarding matters of timeless importance. Even with its more pluralistic and skeptical assumptions, secular humanism continued to emphasize and to value the bonds that join the generations in a real unity, accessible to experience and immune to time, just as the classicist program of the antebellum college had done.

Finally, because secular humanism assumed that the ultimate values toward which a human life may be directed are manageably few in number, its proponents could still think that a student might acquire, in four years of college study, the basic knowledge one needs to be prepared for the question of life's meaning. Secular humanism of course accepted that a choice must be made among different ways of life and left this choice to the person whose life it is—the only person who can make it. But by affirming that a student can acquire, in the span of a college education, a sympathetic acquaintance with the main forms of human living, secular humanism preserved, in a more pluralistic form, the old classicist belief in the

possibility of conveying to each generation the (timeless) knowledge one needs to meet even this most "existential" of questions.

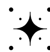
The modern research ideal exploded this set of beliefs. It drained them of their plausibility and appeal. It did this not by proving them to be false. It deprived them of their power by championing a new set of values that contradict the values of recurrence, connection, and closure on which secular humanism was founded.

Because the research ideal elevates originality to a position of supreme importance, it makes the notion of a limited set of ways of life, even incommensurably different ones, seem a barrier to individual invention. The unoriginality that secular humanism celebrates—its belief in a stable repertoire of values that form a recurrent framework of choice in each generation—seems, from the vantage point of the research ideal, not a virtue but a vice, a constraint on the passion for original achievement. What from the standpoint of secular humanism was a source of comfort and consolation thus becomes in the system of values promoted by the research ideal something to be resisted, even despised—a narrow menu of stereotypes that cramp the individual's drive to be original.

The research ideal also sharply devalues the communion with past writers and artists to which secular humanism attached such importance. The immediacy of one's engagement with the great works of the past; the sense of being in the present company of their creators; the experience of contemporaneity that is implied by the idea of the great conversation which the tradition of arts and letters sustains: all of these ideas become suspect, or worse, from the standpoint of the ethic of supersession. The notion of a timeless conversation in which the great voices of the past still speak with undiminished authority, that never concludes and never changes, where all

the generations are present at once, is to those who judge things from the standpoint of this ethic not an impractical ideal but a bad one that denies the possibility of that very progress in understanding that is the scholar's deepest reward.

And of course the idea that one can acquire in any finite period of time (let alone in four short years of college) a more-or-less complete knowledge of any subject (let alone a subject as large and consequential as the array of alternatives that frame a person's answer to the question of what living is for) is bound to seem to those who embrace the research ideal ridiculously naive and even offensive. For the closure and completeness it assumes, were it achievable, would bring to an end the accretive movement toward an asymptote of perfect knowledge that gives each field its life and dignity from the standpoint of this ideal. Without the prospect of further progress, which completeness rules out, a discipline is dead so far as research is concerned. There is nothing more of value to be accomplished in it. It must be abandoned for more fruitful—which is to say, less finished—branches of inquiry. A belief in the possibility of conveying to one's students a knowledge of all the main forms of human living must therefore be judged, from the perspective of the research ideal, not merely unsound but pernicious—a belief that, if taken seriously, denies the very thing to which the scholar is most devoted.



The research ideal thus promoted a set of counter-values that were the antithesis of those that secular humanism supported. But it

undermined the authority of secular humanism in a still more basic way. For it made the question of the meaning of life appear unprofessional—a question that no responsible teacher of the humanities could henceforth take seriously. It demoted the question as a subject of legitimate academic concern by devaluing the point of view from which the question of life's meaning arises most insistently—the only point of view from which it can in fact arise at all.

This is the point of view we take when we consider the purpose and value of our lives as a whole. We cannot, of course, step outside our lives and contemplate them from without. In that sense, the view we take of our lives as a whole is always taken from a vantage point within them, which inevitably has its own special character and varies with our age, mood, and relations to others. "Life as a whole" is something we never experience directly. It is always an idea.

If one were inclined to denigrate this idea, to deny its value and importance, one might say that it is "nothing more" than an idea. This is true, but the denigration is unwarranted. For the idea of life as a whole is one that has tremendous urgency and great practical importance in our lives. We never stop taking the idea seriously and often make important adjustments in our lives on account of our reflections about it. Though we never experience it directly, our life as a whole is rarely far from our attention. When we ask ourselves about the meaning of our lives, about the cares and commitments that give our lives their purpose and direction, it is from the vantage point of this idea that we frame the question.

The idea of life as a whole has two characteristics. The first is its inclusiveness. There is nothing in our lives—no aspect or component of them, no feeling, thought, relation, project, or ambition—

which the idea leaves out. The second is its finitude. My life as a whole includes everything within it and nothing beyond it. However much it contains, however many and varied its parts, my life has a limit. One day I shall cease to exist, and in contemplating my life as a whole I have in mind not only the entirety of all it contains but its mortal limits as well.

I may, of course, answer the question of what living is for by imaginatively inserting my life into the framework of something that will survive it—into God's plan for the world, or the history of my country, or the lives of my children and grandchildren. It may even be that the question of life's meaning can only be answered in this way, that our lives as a whole can be meaningful to us only in relation to something larger and more lasting than our selves. But regardless of how we *answer* the question, the vantage point from which we *ask* it is that of life as a whole, and from this perspective the mortality of our lives is as inescapable a premise as the inclusion of all they contain. When I think of my life as a whole I think of it as a bounded totality, as the sum of everything my life contains within the limits fixed by death. If I leave one of its parts out of account, I am not thinking of my life as a *whole.* If I imagine myself living forever, I am not thinking of my *life* as a whole. The thought of my life as a whole joins inclusiveness and finitude in a distinctive way. Their combination produces the idea from whose vantage point the question of life's meaning arises, even if the answer I give emphasizes exclusively one part of my life or places it in a context unbounded by the limits of my own mortality. The logic of the question, as distinct from the answers we give to it, presupposes this peculiar union of totality and mortality, and the more we are in the habit of thinking

about both—about the inclusiveness of our lives and their mortal limits—the more familiar the idea of life as a whole is likely to seem and the more urgent the question of its meaning.

The modern research ideal discourages us from thinking about either. It draws our attention away from the whole of our lives and requires that we focus on some small aspect of them instead. It discourages inclusiveness and promotes a narrowing of attention, at least within the realm of academic study. At the same time, it deflects attention from the fact that we die, and in place of an acceptance of the mortal limits of one's life encourages the scholar to see things, and to value them, from the deathless perspective of the discipline to which he or she belongs. In these ways, the research ideal devalues the elements of inclusiveness and finitude from whose combination the idea of life as a whole derives. It makes the idea of our lives as a whole seem less familiar and compelling. And by doing so, it causes the question of what living is for to seem less urgent, less recognizable even, within the domain in which the modern research ideal holds sway. For however one answers this question, the question itself only comes into view from the vantage point of an idea composed of elements the ideal negates.

This is easiest to see in the case of the first of these elements.

The research ideal insists on specialization. It demands that the researcher select one small corner of his or her field to cultivate exclusively, leaving the rest to others to develop. It asserts that any results of real scholarly value can be achieved only on the condition of such specialization, and condemns the refusal to accept its dictates as a sterile dilettantism incapable of producing anything of intellectual worth.

Specialization is the enemy of inclusiveness—not just in the sense of being incompatible with it, but in the stronger sense of regarding it as irresponsible, as frivolous and self-indulgent, in a word, immoral. The ideal of scholarship as a vocation celebrates the renunciation of all other interests for the sake of one's speciality as a virtue of the highest order. It views specialization as an admirable form of self-sacrifice and elevates it to a moral ideal in accordance with the concept of Bildung which helped its nineteenth-century champions view scholarly specialization as a spiritual value. In any academic discipline in which the research ideal becomes dominant and the requirement of specialization constrains those who wish to be taken seriously in the field, the idea of life as a whole, and hence the question of what living is for, is therefore bound to seem less respectable.

Less obviously, perhaps, but just as insistently, the research ideal draws attention away from the second element of which this idea is composed—the mortality of the researcher himself. No one, scholars included, ever forgets for very long that he must die. But the scholar devoted to the advancement of knowledge in his field is encouraged by the research ideal to consider his own death a non-event, one that lacks significance so far as the work of the discipline itself is concerned. For the researcher who sees the importance of his work in this way, what really matters is the progress of understanding in his field, to which he makes an individual contribution but whose "life," unlike his own, has no boundaries at all. From the perspective of the multigenerational enterprise in which he is engaged, the researcher's own mortality has little or no meaning. Within the realm of academic study, the research ideal devalues

death. It deprives death of significance for the scholar who embraces this ideal, and makes any preoccupation on his part with the fact of his mortality seem unprofessional and self-absorbed.

The question of what living is for arises only from the standpoint of the idea of life as a whole. This idea is at once inclusive and bounded. It gathers every aspect of one's life and underscores its mortal limits. Only this combination of inclusiveness and mortality provides the perspective from which the question of the meaning of life comes into view. The modern research ideal attacks both elements of this idea at once. Through its demand for specialization, it discourages inclusiveness. It requires the scholar to concentrate her attention on something much smaller than life as a whole and disdains more inclusive pursuits as a dilettantism with little or no academic value. And through its insistence on the supreme importance of the discipline, of the multigenerational program of discovery and invention in which the individual researcher is engaged and in the context of whose larger life her own mortal career has no meaning, the research ideal minimizes the importance of mortality and promotes an ethic of supersession that condemns the scholar who takes her death too seriously as immature and unprofessional.

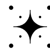
The modern research ideal thus compels those who embrace it to concentrate their attention on matters that are, at once, both smaller and larger than their lives as a whole. It discourages, at once, the inclusiveness and the attention to mortality from whose combination the idea of life as a whole derives. It devalues both and deprives the idea of its ethical and spiritual worth. It makes the idea of life as a whole seem childish, ridiculous, unprofessional, self-indulgent. And by doing that, it undermines the credibility and

authority of the one point of view from which the question of what living is for arises.

The effect of this, of course, is not to make the question itself disappear, but only to deprive it of legitimacy within the arena of academic work—to push it out of school. Human beings, scholars included, are irresistibly drawn to the question of life's meaning, and there is no reason to expect this will change. But to the extent the modern research ideal systematically devalues the perspective from which this question must be asked, it compels those who would ask it to look outside the academy for answers. It says, to teachers and students alike, "Do not look for answers to the question of life's meaning here. Do not even expect the question to be raised here, for to do so would violate the most basic premises on which modern scholarship is based. If you are interested in the meaning of life, take the question up with your family and friends, with your rabbi or priest, but do not expect that you can give, or will receive, any authoritative guidance in answering it in school—in any academic discipline, the humanities included, that subscribes to the research ideal."

For students, the result is that they are thrown back on their own resources in searching for an answer. For teachers, the result is perhaps even worse. Many college and university teachers devote a large fraction of their waking hours to their careers, and the boundary between their work and the rest of their lives is often quite fluid. What the professional research scholar learns to devalue in school may therefore be especially difficult to honor elsewhere in his life. Even in his private life, the modern scholar who fits his work to the demands of the research ideal may find it harder than others to take seriously the question of life's meaning—a question he remains as

eager as anyone to ask, but whose legitimacy the moral and spiritual requirements of his work, and the habits of mind these instill, forbid him even to acknowledge.



The research ideal is today the organizing principle of work in every academic discipline. It defines the culture of professionalism that American graduate students encounter at the threshold of their careers. It sets the standards by which they are taught to judge their work, and in doing so establishes the norms and expectations that govern the world of higher education generally.

The advantages of organizing the production of knowledge in accordance with this ideal are as apparent in the humanities as they are in every other field. Scholars in the humanities have produced vast quantities of research that have profoundly enriched our understanding of their subjects. We know more today about the origin of Homer's poems, the order of Plato's dialogues, the content of Augustine's sermons, the accuracy of Gibbon's citations, and how Ben Franklin spent his time in Paris than we ever knew before. These are real gains—the lasting benefits of specialized research, which has produced impressive results in the humanities as in every branch of academic study.

But the triumph of the research ideal has been for the humanities at most a mixed blessing. For the benefits it has brought, though real, do not compare with its benefits in the natural and social sciences. And by undermining the authority of secular humanism, the research ideal has deprived the humanities of their most distinctive

and valuable possession. It has deprived them of the special authority they once possessed as instructors in the meaning of life and given them, in return, the right to be judged by standards which the natural and social sciences will always be more successful in meeting.

In the natural sciences, the research ideal has proved remarkably fruitful. The new discoveries that pour from our college and university laboratories every year and the clear sense of progressive movement toward an objective understanding of the structure and mechanisms of the natural world testify to the productive fit between the natural sciences and the modern research ideal. The same is true, if to a lesser degree, in the social sciences, especially in those disciplines like economics and political science that make strong and credible claims to possess expanding bodies of objective knowledge about the social world.

In the humanities, by contrast, the benefits of research are less uniform or certain. In some fields, such as history, scholarly research has produced valuable results—an accumulation of discoveries that has deepened our understanding of events and personalities. But in other fields, like literary criticism, it is not at all clear that the sequence of interpretations championed by scholars of succeeding generations constitutes a similarly progressive body of knowledge—as opposed to a cyclical alteration of outlook and values, what Northrop Frye called the spinning of the prayer-wheel of interpretation and a skeptic might describe as the product of fashion or fad.[39] Indeed, to the extent that history is an interpretive discipline and not just a growing repository of facts the same may be said of it too. For viewed in this light, it is less obvious that the competing interpretations of historians of different generations represent a progres-

sive line and not a fashion-driven circle. And in philosophy—a heavily professionalized field now dominated by the research ideal—it can still be claimed without embarrassment that there have been few advances since Plato, a claim whose counterpart in physics or biology or economics would be absurd.

The promise of the research ideal is a steadily growing body of knowledge that approximates ever more closely to the truth about a subject—to the truth about the behavior of subatomic particles, for example, or the dynamics of markets. It is the prospect of such knowledge that motivates and justifies the acceptance of this ideal in any particular field of study. In the natural and social sciences, the goal of an ever-closer approximation to the truth seems entirely reasonable and the appropriateness of a system of specialized research as a means for pursuing this goal appears equally obvious. Its suitability as a means is confirmed by the results of the research itself which moves our knowledge of these subjects forward from one generation to the next in a process of steady accretion.

In the humanities, this is less clear. It is less obvious that the commitment to specialization and multigenerational cooperation that define the modern research ideal is equally well-suited to these disciplines or capable of producing results that confirm its validity with the same undeniable force they do in the natural and social sciences. That is not because the ideas of truth and objectivity have no place in the humanities. Most if not all teachers of history, philosophy, and literature believe there is a truth of the matter about the subjects they study and teach. Indeed, their belief that this is so is a condition of the intelligibility of what they say and do, for there can be no coherent discussion of any subject without an implicit

belief in the possibility of discovering the truth about it. What is missing in the humanities is not a commitment to the truth. What is missing is the basis for a confident belief, so palpable in the natural and social sciences, that specialized research and truth are *linked*—that the first is the best, perhaps the only, means for achieving the second. Where the fruits of specialized research accumulate in a growing body of knowledge that moves slowly but surely toward the truth, as they do in the natural and stronger social sciences, a belief of this sort is well-founded. But where the work of scholars, however enlightening, fails to accumulate in the same incremental and progressive way, moving around in a circle instead, this belief is harder to sustain.

That is the case in the humanities. Here the connection between the truth and the modern research ideal is harder to discern and defend. By comparison with the natural and social sciences, where it is obvious and strong, the connection in the humanities is ambiguous and fitful at best. Judged by the results in these other disciplines, research in the humanities is bound to seem less conclusive, less accretive, less fully or finally subject to appraisal in the light of standards scholars consider objectively binding. However valuable the results of their research, teachers of the humanities who judge their work from the standpoint of the research ideal therefore condemn themselves to a position of inferiority in the hierarchy of academic authority and prestige.

At the same time, humanities teachers who judge things from this point of view undermine the unique authority they once enjoyed as guides to the meaning of life. In the modern university, only the humanities have had the inclination and ability to provide such

guidance. This sets them apart from the natural and social sciences and defines their special contribution to the work of higher education. It gives the humanities their distinctive authority and a position of dignity and worth in an educational environment dominated by the research ideal. But the values of the research ideal devalue the question of what living is for. They undermine the tradition of secular humanism and sap the confidence that teachers of the humanities once had in their ability to help answer this question. By accepting the imperatives of the research ideal and arranging their work to meet its demands, humanities teachers have therefore traded a valuable and distinctive authority for one based upon values they can never hope to realize to anything like the degree their colleagues in the natural and social sciences can. For the humanities, this has been a very bad bargain indeed. It has left teachers in these disciplines with a sense of inferiority and no way back to their lost authority. It has left them in an anxious void, without a secure sense of their own special role in higher education.

It was into this void that the political ideas of the 1960s and 1970s entered—the ideas of diversity and multiculturalism, and the theory that values are merely disguised acts of power. These took root in the humanities in part because they met with no resistance—because teachers in these fields had lost the self-confidence that would have given them the strength to resist. But more fundamentally, they took root because they seemed to offer an antidote to the emptiness produced by the humanities' own endorsement of the research ideal.

But the cure has proved an illusion. The culture of political correctness that has grown from these ideas has not restored the

self-confidence of the humanities but further weakened it instead. It has diminished their authority, not repaired it. It has placed the humanities at an even greater distance from the question of life's meaning—the real source of their most lasting authority—and made it even more imperative that teachers of the humanities recover the wisdom and nerve to ask it.