THE UNDOING OF THE UNIVERSITY: MODERN INTELLECTUAL MISERY AND GILBERT CHESTERTON'S CREED OF LIMITS

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What a mess universities are in today. If they are not doomed, then they are most certainly broken. It is difficult to overstate just how wretched the condition of the contemporary university is. This is a desolation that is not a consequence of failure but of success. The universities are the victim of their own success.[1] Since the 1970s universities across the OECD and elsewhere have grown massively in relation to the population of their home nations. The proportion of nineteen year olds entering university has sky-rocketed in the past forty years. As relative numbers have grown, the university contribution to teaching and research has shrunk. The median student learns much less today at university than was the case 20 or 40 years ago. Most students now have only a passing acquaintance with a core university curriculum. The median academic today produces less research per annum and visibly less research of high quality.[2] The size of universities has turned them into bureaucratic leviathans. Central costs as a proportion of total costs have ballooned across forty years. The keystone of the teaching university, informal contact between teacher and student, has virtually disappeared as teaching academics have been drawn into a vacuous welter of administrative committees, email, documentation and regulation.[3]

The reason for all of this has nothing to do with pedagogy or the life of the mind. It was a product of social engineering. Specifically it was a consequence of the desire of social reformers to increase upward social mobility. The intent going back to the 1950s and 1960s was to increase the life-outcomes of children from low socio-economic backgrounds. The aim was to increase the percentage of children from poor families going to university and then into the professions.

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1 The downward slide of university student performance is documented in Murray (2008) and Arum and Roksa (2011). On the parallel decline in university research performance, see Murphy, 'Discovery' (2010). The rise of the administrative university is recounted in Ginsburg (2011).

2 In Australia research publication output per academic teaching staff member declined from 1.3 per capita in 1991, 1.4 in 1992 and 1.6 in 1993 to 0.6 in 1996, 0.8 in 2001, 1.0 in 2006, and 1.0 in 2010 (calculated from Australian Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education university staff and research publication data). On the long-term drop in high-level creation, see Murphy forthcoming.

3 Arum and Roska (2011), 11.

The supposed means of achieving this end was to increase the number of places at university. The number of 19 year olds at university has risen from less than one percent of the age cohort to over thirty percent, and in the last decade a cacophony of voices has demanded that the number rise to forty or fifty percent or more. How has that worked out? Badly—the portion of students from low socio-economic strata at university remained largely static over thirty years. The major beneficiaries of ballooning university places were academically weaker middle and upper strata students. The net personal benefit for many and probably most of these students has been minimal. Today around 25 percent of undergraduate students permanently drop out of university study.[4] Another 25 percent, who graduate, end up in jobs that do not require a degree.[5] The vast number of places that these students occupy at university has been funded over the past decades by a mix of personal debt (student loans) and sovereign debt. There is no clear sign that this has been a productive investment for either governments or for the students who make up the bottom third of university performers.

When they graduate from university, the latter go to work in service jobs. They work as anything from airline hostesses to dog groomers. These are perfectly fine jobs but there is no reason that anyone needs to go to university to be an air hostess. What is required is a pleasing personality, and no course of study will ever give you that. In the United States alone graduates today owe the state more than a trillion dollars in student debt. Debt makes sense only if the debtor is going to earn a high income. About 8 percent of jobs are professional jobs with high incomes. Another 8 percent of jobs are sub-professional jobs with more than decent incomes. With 30 percent of nineteen year olds now going to university in most OECD countries, and pressure for 40 or 50 percent to go, there is no way that in the case of a third or more of graduates the benefits of student loans will ever unambiguously outweigh the costs. At best these graduates are paying heavily to move themselves up the queue a bit for the better service jobs.

All of this was done initially in the name of improving the life-chances of "talented students" from poor backgrounds. Later, as the argument morphed, it became an imperative to improve the life-chances of "students" from poor backgrounds. It did neither. Indeed the talented likely suffered. In the 1950s and 1960s in Australia for instance there were excellent schemes of university and national scholarships for study at university. The latter was based on an IQ-style

[4] The official Australian figure is 28 percent: Bradley (2008), 10.
[5] OECD (2009), 43.

scholastic aptitude test. It identified and subsidized talent effectively. Yet this talent-seeking subsidy was then reallocated to finance the ballooning number of student places. The government-funded expansion of student places served an ideology that trumpeted the upward mobility of talent. Its rhetoric was daunting but its reality was dismal. What it actually achieved was more places going to the less talented, which was a vote-winner in middle strata suburbs but it hardly ensured "the advancement of talent irrespective of circumstance". In fact it militated against talent.

The hostility of the mass university to talent is today starkly evident. There is now remarkably little learning of a standard university kind going on in universities. Research shows what every undergraduate university teacher knows from experience. A third to a half of students in any undergraduate class struggles with the course content. No matter how much the content is masticated, no matter how much it is simplified, no matter how much it is spoon feed, students who have no natural aptitude for university study will never adequately understand a university curriculum. No amount of text books, course supplements, remedial instruction, faculty pandering, or inflation of grades can make the subject matter stick. A good teacher can make university material lucid, but a good teacher cannot make the material non-conceptual because then it is no longer suitable for a university or for professional employment. No amount of "applied-this" or "applied-that" can circumvent that bottom-line reality. As the mass university expanded, enrolling students fled from traditional disciplines like physics and philosophy and economics into the domain of "studies". They gravitated to courses like business studies, media studies and nursing studies. But that did not obviate the problem. The result is that now the knowledge capacity of 45 per cent of undergraduate students advances negligibly between first and second year at university, as Arum and Roska in 2011 demonstrated. The researchers drew on test work of 2,000 plus tertiary students. The students participated in America's Collegiate Learning Assessment exercise in 2005-2007. In their first semester at university and again at the end of their second year, they read a set of documents about a fictional business or political problem and then wrote a memorandum to a notional official advising how to tackle the problem. What the data from the assessment exercise indicated was that 45 percent of students made no progress whatsoever in critical thinking, complex reasoning or writing between first and second year.

There is nothing surprising about that result. Anyone who has taught in the university system for 20 or 30 years has routinely observed the same. Nonetheless, and this is a crucial irony, almost all university academic staff publicly insist on the "principle" that everyone should go to university. This is in spite of the fact that almost every working academic privately despairs every single day that a third or a half of the students in undergraduate classes do in fact learn little or nothing whatsoever. Governments and universities address the collateral damage of the mass university by expanding learning bureaucracies that claim to remedy academic failure. They do no such thing. Over thirty years they have had zero effect on student academic performance. Students nominally "succeed" because university grades have been inflated. A C-minus grade from 1972 is a B-plus grade today. Has student understanding increased accordingly? No. Will students with a B-plus grade today find a high-paying professional job? No, because what the student in effect has is the counterfeit of a C-minus grade from institutions not prepared to say so. No amount of faux grades can increase the percentage of professional jobs that society needs. No inflation of university results can disguise the fact readily apparent from a two-minute conversation that a person does not have a fluent capacity for complex thinking, reasoning and writing. If you do not have that then you will end up in one of the numerous service jobs in a modern society, which are perfectly decent and conducive to human happiness. Very few students relative to the very large student body today choose to study philosophy and history. These are demanding traditional liberal-arts disciplines. Yet in the United Kingdom in 2010-2011 these disciplines (not "studies") were among the top ten degrees for getting a job. They ranked alongside the also demanding physical, mathematical, biological and biomedical sciences.[6]

The Folly of the Intellectuals

[6] See http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/9415613/Graduate-jobs-Top-10-degree-subjects-for-getting-a-job.html based on2010-2011 data from the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency. The other five degree groups included the less intellectually demanding disciplines of languages, law, education, agricultural science, and medicine, dentistry and veterinary science. The intellectual demands of areas can be gauged from the calculation by the Czech physicist Motl (2006) of the average IQ scores for participants in American PhD programs, based on GRE (Graduate Record Examination) scores: 130.0 Physics, 129.0 Mathematics, 128.5 Computer Science, 128.0 Economics, 127.5 Chemical engineering, 127.0 Material science, 126.0 Electrical engineering, 125.5 Mechanical engineering, 125.0 Philosophy, 124.0 Chemistry, 123.0 Earth sciences, 122.0 Industrial engineering, 122.0 Civil engineering, 121.5 Biology, 120.1 English/literature, 120.0 Religion/theology, 119.8 Political science, 119.7 History, 118.0 Art history, 117.7 Anthropology/archaeology, 116.5 Architecture, 116.0 Business, 115.0 Sociology, 114.0 Psychology, 114.0 Medicine, 112.0 Communication, 109.0 Education, 106.0 Public administration.

Universities have expanded beyond their natural limit. Could there have been a more pointless ambition or a greater waste of private and public money? If we consider why this happened we would have to conclude that governments played a part in it. They offered voters the illusion that their children would get something most of them by statistical measure cannot and will not ever get which is a path through university to high-paying professional jobs. As previously noted, such jobs make up about 8 per cent of the workforce. Another 8 percent are made up of sub-professional jobs. The most number of graduates, from universities and polytechnics combined, that a society in the foreseeable future could possibly need would amount to 20 percent of the 24-64 year old population.[7] Everything that we know about the intellectual discipline of the university and human capacity tells us that at the upper limit about 12 per cent of the population can convincingly undertake a standard university curriculum. How come governments believe that 30, 40 or 50 percent of the population could benefit from a university place? The short answer is: *intellectuals*.

The modern university is a creation of the secular clerisy of intellectuals. This is a very odd class. It is one that has some very odd beliefs. Next time you hear someone say that Christians for instance have silly beliefs, just remember that no one can match the secular clerisy for faddish, outlandish and downright weird ideas. Untold millions died in the twentieth century on the shameful altar of these beliefs. The quandaries of the contemporary university are trivial by comparison with that. Nonetheless they have the same root cause. This cause is the arrant and errant beliefs of the secular clerisy class. No writer in the last century understood the follies of the intellectual class better than G.K. Chesterton. His vast output is peppered with witty, acerbic and penetrating observations of the mad fads and fancies of academics, media and corporate intellectuals and the path that they routinely beat to the font of stupidity.

A number of characterizations of intellectuals recur in Chesterton's writing. The one that is most common and the one that I think is most explanatory of the pathologies of the intellectual class and its institutions—not least the institution of the modern university—is its hatred of limits. Modern intellectuals, Chesterton observed, seek a world where there are no limitations. This is an anamorphic world bereft of outline. You can see the consequences of this in the decrepit state that the contemporary university finds itself in. The university is supposed to be a

[7] Official estimates always exaggerate this need. Nevertheless, The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects through to 2020 that only 20% of U.S. jobs require a degree and 10% require a post-high school certificate. See BLS, 'Employment by summary education and training assignment, 2010 and projected 2020'.

place where people struggle with great and demanding intellectual problems and devise imaginative solutions to those problems. Yet today routinely half of the student population in universities learns little or nothing, let alone grapples with any questions great or demanding. The secular clerisy created this grotesque situation. They demanded the unlimited expansion of the university. Universities ballooned from the 1870s to the 1920s and then from 1970s until today. Universities grew from less than one percent of nineteen year olds to thirty plus per cent. Along the way, no one thought to draw the line and say "*enough and no more*".

Our ability to "draw a line" is essential to who and what we are. It lies at the core of our species-being. Through limit and shape, we create both good art and good politics. It is no accident then that Chesterton began his adult life as an art student. He enrolled at the Slade School of Fine Art, part of the University of London. While Chesterton soon drifted away from art school—first attending lectures on literature and then dropping out altogether to become a journalist—he remained of the view that one of the most important things in life is to be able to draw a line. There are two sources of Chesterton's world-view. One is the ancient Greeks for whom the *peras*, the perimeter, the line, was sacred. This view passed from Aristotle to Aquinas—and beyond. The second was Christianity. In *The Everlasting Man*, Chesterton compared Christianity with a key.[8] A key is a thing with shape. It is a thing that depends entirely on keeping its shape. Christianity, Chesterton concluded, is a philosophy of shapes and the enemy of shapelessness. To love anything is to love its boundaries.[9] Boundaries are the most beautiful things in the world. Indeed, he reflects in *Orthodoxy*, God had made a world that was separate from Him and in so making the world, set it free.[10]

Religious dogma, Chesterton contended in *Heretics*, shows things in their limits—in their plain and defiant shape.[11] Chesterton loved the clearness of shape.[12] The imagination, he observed, is not shadowy or fantastic. It is clear-cut, definitive and unalterable. It proffers shapes that persist through change. Modern intellectuals, however, have replaced shape and limit with the absurd heresy of progress.[13] They are always concerned in Chesterton's eyes with "the breaking of bonds, the effacing of boundaries and the casting away of dogmas". Is that not good?

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8 Chesterton (1993), 199-212.
9 Chesterton (1986-), XXXIII, 302-303.
10 Chesterton (1986-), I, 270-283.
11 Chesterton (1986-), I, 201-207.
12 Chesterton (n.d.), 133-137, 148-149, 160, 166
13 Chesterton (1986-), I, 196-198.

Well, thought Chesterton, trees have no dogmas and turnips are singularly broad-minded. In fact, the intellectual's progress is a cult.[14] The cult of modernity foolishly defines truth in terms of time rather eternity.[15] It does the same to freedom, whereas true liberty is a kind of liberty that resists the corrosion of time. It is the liberty to bind oneself.[16] As Chesterton says in *The New Jerusalem*, what we (properly) call choice is a sharp combination of limitation and liberty.[17] This is the setting of the creative limit.

Chesterton thought that vision was important in life but that a vision always had to be accompanied by a veto. In *Orthodoxy*, he observed that vision hangs on a veto.[18] Without the veto, without the check or the limit, visions turn into formless chaos. Chesterton was one of those rare modern personalities who took the notion of the line and the limit seriously. In his *Autobiography* he reflected that "[all] my life I have loved edges and the boundary line that brings one thing sharply against another. All my life I have loved frames and limits; and I will maintain that the largest wilderness looks larger seen through a window."[19] Me too, I agree, yet too few moderns and almost no modern intellectuals think so. As Chesterton observed: "They believe in a great and groping thing like a tree but I believe in the flower and the fruit; and the flower is often small. The fruit is final and in that sense finite; it has a form and therefore a limit." [20] Chesterton thought that the world involved strict limits and conditions while intellectuals always preferred to talk about expansion and largeness.[21] The consequence of this is that modern intellectual life is filled with bizarre and atrocious fads. Chesterton routinely berated intellectuals for their fascination with all things creepy—from the pseudo-science of eugenics to the public policy and petty tyranny of Prohibition to the insane images of the Nietzschean Superman. "The modern academy of fads and fashions," he concluded, "[is] conducted on the lines of a luxurious madhouse."[22] Indeed it is: in the madhouse, the normal is sacrificed to the abnormal and the exception is allowed to alter the rule. This is what intellectuals call reason. Watch out for that. Intellectuals, Chesterton observed, combine an expansive and exhaustive

14 Chesterton (1986-), I, 129-131.
15 Chesterton (1986-), XI.
16 Chesterton (1986-), I, 307-328.
17 Chesterton (1986-), XX.
18 Chesterton (1986-), I, 252-268.
19 Chesterton (1986-), XVI, 39-41; see also Chesterton (1904), 1-43 and Chesterton (1986-), IV, 229-237..
20 Chesterton (1986-), XVI, 213-216.
21 Chesterton (1986-), I, 252-268.
22 Chesterton (1986-), XVI, 241-288.

(and I would add: exhausting) reason with a contracted common sense.[23] This is so true. A common source of the malicious and harmful fads of modern life is a patent lack of common sense. That is to say, the common sense of limits—and closely related to that, the common sense of proportion.

Look at the case of the university. It grew unchecked. When it started to do so again in the 1970s, the appetite of the secular clerisy for this expansion was frenzied. One might even say it was unholy. It was certainly naïve and self-destructive. The intellectuals talked *ad nauseam* about social justice and opportunity and access and public good. Well, beware of what you wish for. For when all the access in the world was achieved the university stood broken. The intellectuals had destroyed their own temple. Places at university were filled with people who simply stared blankly at their textbooks. Government could not properly afford for them to be there. Yet it still wanted even more of them to enroll. The intellectuals repeatedly told governments that this was a public good, even though privately the intellectuals all violently gnashed their teeth at the fact that a third or a half of the students in their classes were simply uncomprehending of anything they said. The intellectuals continued to believe their own self-refuting beliefs even if every-day those beliefs became more and more unbelievable. The smarter among the intellectuals instinctively dodged teaching and sought sanctuary in the less stressful pastures of research and administration. The tertiary students who could not learn and the teachers who discovered that those students could not be taught entered into a tacit social contract to leave each other alone. This contract became the norm such that today even in notionally high-achieving schools like Berkeley students spend the majority of their week watching TV, surfing the web and playing with social media—all for their own entertainment.[24]

Chesterton observed that one of the easiest routes to making something universal was to make it uninteresting.[25] That is what the secular clerisy did to the universities. What in principle should be fascinating—a university curriculum and its mode of inquiry—became fatuous. Everyone lost interest in it, even the clerisy. They did this by turning the core premises of the great works of the university from paradoxes into platitudes. A vacuous, grim, bigoted non-language now permeates the contemporary university. Chesterton also observed the intolerance that necessarily follows when people begin preaching platitudes instead of paradoxes. The

[23] Chesterton (1986-), I, 217-231.
[24] Arum and Roska (2011), 98.
[25] Chesterton (1986-), XX.

greatness of Christianity derives from its paradoxical core. The lack of distinction of the contemporary university derives from the opposite. The universal ambitions of the modern intellectual mutated into the small-minded tyranny of over-wrought clichés and insipid gibberish. Students switched on their TVs and switched off in the class room. No one listens any more to what academics have to say except possibly the small army of academics, and even in that case I am not so sure.

At every turn Chesterton insisted on the importance of limits in human life. Human creation, he reflected, is successful because it is limited. It begins and ends in images and shapes that are defined by boundaries. Human beings are free not because they lack constraint but because they can be constrained and constrain their own selves in interesting ways. That freedom relies on constraint is a paradox and life, at least the most compelling aspects of life, is paradoxical. A free society is one where there is much laughter and merriment. This is because when we laugh, we laugh at the inherent paradoxes and contradictions of life. Christianity, Chesterton often had cause to observe, is a comic religion. It is comic because it is rooted in paradox and from such incongruity creation arises. Christianity is a religion of incongruity, much to the annoyance of rationalists, and because of that it symbolizes and embodies the power of creation. Laughter is the twin of creation. Both draw from the root of paradox. Religion that has no sense of divine paradox lacks a sense of humor. Such humorlessness is dangerous because it is conducive to mania and extreme behavior. It is also ruinous to creation.

Every religious phenomenon has its secular equivalent. The modern intellectual was defiantly secular and tacitly religious. The more intellectuals denied being religious, the more they managed to behave as a clerisy. More significantly, their cod-religion was humorless. They were here not to cheer things up but to improve things, an earnest business if there ever was one. Progress, their progress, was meant to emancipate us. It was supposed to liberate us from limits. It rationalized incongruities, tore down boundaries, and promised us infinite possibilities. The majority of modern intellectuals were zealots of progress and accordingly they redefined the university in its image. Where-ever progress was decoupled from tradition the result was the same: a glib, drab, vacuous, clichéd and pointless nonentity triumphed. When this happened, the world was subsumed by insignificance and the university broken in pieces. Humpty Dumpty could not put it back together again. The consequence was enervation in research and conspicuous joylessness in teaching and learning.

Chesterton observed the culpability of modern intellectuals. Their ideals were creepy: from the science of eugenics to the idea of the Superman. They dreamt of a world that was without frivolity and without limitations. Accordingly they intervened to emancipate everything. They emancipated the university. They undid its connection to the Classical and the Christian traditions. They encouraged it to balloon unstoppably, without anchor or purpose. From kitsch humanities to junk science, the result is evident for all to see—excepting those who do not wish to see. While it is true that many intellectuals hate what they have created, they also wallow in the misery of it all. They whimper over each crisis of the university as it spirals down. They blame everyone but themselves for it. In truth, though, to undo the pathologies of the modern university, we would have to undo the pathologies of the modern intellectual. That, I'm afraid, is much easier to say than give effect to.

Whenever you contemplate the resulting wasteland, remember that intellectuals turned the universities into sanctums of emptiness and entertainment because they had—and have—no sense of limits. Modern intellectuals could not work out what were the right proportions of nineteen year olds to attend university because they could not accept that anyone should leave high school and go straight into the workplace. They could not say: "*this far and no further"*. The result of this mode of thinking has been a disaster. Governments cannot afford it. Science suffers. The humanities have been crucified. High-level creation in the university has declined. Research outputs per capita are shrinking. Tuition fees far exceed their long-term value for a third or more of university enrollees and many ex-students now end up in debt-bondage. Meanwhile governments cannot properly support the places that they have willy-nilly created in higher education. Fifty percent of those in university will either drop out or will never be employed in a job that requires a degree. This is an unutterable mess.

The only way out of the debacle is to restore a sense of the limit in higher education—and that means limiting the numbers of students per capita enrolling in universities. It means over the next thirty years gradually rolling back the size of universities, halving their size in real per capita terms and reducing bloated student populations, faculty numbers and the leviathan of university administration. Such a policy approach is only possible if we resolve the underlying problem which is the unlimited horizon of the secular clerisy. The secular clerisy has to reform itself. Even better, it has to abolish itself—though the latter, I admit, may be hoping for too much. Those whose business it is to think and reason need to reacquaint themselves and be

reacquainted with a sense of the limit. The vision, the idea, of the university is now kaput. To resurrect a vision of the university we have to revive along with such a vision the idea of the veto. To affirm the vision and to say "yes" we have to learn once again to exercise the veto and say "no".

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