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# MacIntyre and the Challenges of Higher Education in the 21st Century

## Abstract

Reflection on the nature of the university and its role in contemporary society occupies an important place in the work of the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. His academic career and his view of the incommensurable nature of moral discourses combine to suggest an original and provocative proposal for a new model of higher education. This model is characterized by a unity based on a philosophical and theological formality capable of dispelling the dangers of fragmentation and utilitarian specialization. In MacIntyre's proposal, the university becomes the most important vehicle for organizing knowledge and, consequently, for ordering social life.

*Keywords:* university, crisis, educational challenge, organization of knowledge

## Introduction

Alasdair MacIntyre was born in Glasgow in 1929 and spent his childhood and youth in London while always maintaining close ties with his relatives in Scotland and Northern Ireland, where his family on his father's

side was from. From the age of 13 to 16 years he studied at Epsom College in Surrey, where he was greatly influenced by a tutor who had studied under the philosopher and historian R. G. Collingwood. His reading of Collingwood led the young MacIntyre to John Ruskin, one of the greatest scholars and masters of English prose in the 19th century. MacIntyre then went on to graduate at the age of just 20, from Queen Mary College of the University of London, where he was awarded an honors Bachelor of Arts in Classics. At Queen Mary, he was greatly influenced by the scholarly virtues of W. Alison Laidlaw, a noted classicist of the time. Laidlaw helped MacIntyre to understand Plato, Aristotle, and other classics in a spirit of great love of truth and through a profoundly scientific approach. These were difficult times, the post-war years, and the future was full of uncertainty. MacIntyre joined the Communist Party of Great Britain at around this time, but soon became disenchanted with its organizational inefficiency and dissimulations of the crimes of Stalinism. At around the same time, he occasionally attended seminars given in London by the analytic philosopher A. J. Ayer, as well as meetings of the Christian Student Movement at Queen Mary. MacIntyre's interest in philosophy then led him to enroll in the MA program at the University of Manchester, where his MA thesis was entitled *The Significance of Moral Judgements*. Indeed, the subject of moral judgments and their epistemological and practical status would be among the main themes of his philosophy throughout his life. He taught Philosophy at the University of Manchester for six years before deciding to move to the USA in the late 1960s. The decision to emigrate was driven in part by his disappointment with the growing politicization of European universities and in part by the opportunity of developing his project for the study of moral language and cultural contexts in a country much more suited for comparison of rival cultural traditions. In the 1970s, he taught and pursued his research at Brandeis University, Boston University, and Wellesley College, all in the state of Massachusetts. From 1977 on, he concentrated his efforts on developing his own philosophical project. This he presented in 1981 in one of the most influential works of the last century in the field of practical philosophy, *After Virtue*. The book sent out veritable philosophical and literary shock waves,

dividing audiences and attracting both strong supporters and radical critics. The following year he left Massachusetts to work at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, later taking up an appointment at the Catholic University of Notre Dame in Indiana. Although he subsequently worked at other American universities, he continued to be linked to Notre Dame until his retirement. In 2010, he joined the Center for Contemporary Aristotelian Studies in Ethics and Politics at London Metropolitan University, while maintaining his status as a United States resident. Over the course of his career, Alasdair MacIntyre has received honorary degrees from four American universities, three British universities and one Irish university, as well as numerous other honorary distinctions and accolades from around the world.

These brief biographical notes serve to explain why we should listen carefully to what Alasdair MacIntyre has to say about the role of the university in contemporary Western societies. As we shall see, MacIntyre is deeply critical of the university world as it is today, in both Europe and the United States. However, this critique is not the result of any open or concealed resentment towards the particular institutions at which he has been engaged. Rather, it is the result of the development and application of his philosophical project. Generally speaking we can say – even at the risk of falling into crude simplification – that MacIntyre's project begins with his realization of the incommensurable nature of moral discourses used in different philosophical and cultural traditions. It then continues with an argument for a greater degree of reasonableness and explanatory capacity of one's own and others' shortcomings within the Aristotelian–Augustinian–Thomist tradition, in which he includes himself. Finally, the project concludes by stating the urgent need to restore a *locus* where dialogue between rival traditions can take place without ideological prejudices or the interference of economic utilitarian discourses. This *locus* should be, precisely, the university, and that is why, throughout the opening decade of the 21ˢᵗ century, the Scottish philosopher insisted repeatedly on the need to rethink the university, its nature, and its goals.

### The educational dimension of the current crisis

As a result of a decade of global economic crisis and this year's global pandemic, when we talk about current educational challenges, we focus mainly on such issues as the lack or overuse of new technologies in the classroom and at home; the digital divide; the lack of connection between what is learned at school or university and the real needs of a changing society; cutbacks in public spending; etc. In this context, one is tempted to take another look at school and university with a view to determining how they can be employed to resolve future health and financial crises. We also frequently hear the wish expressed to transform education into a process that safeguards the multicultural and democratic nature of society (Harris, 2012).

MacIntyre's vision of all this is very different. His habitual ability to provoke also emerges in this field as he assures us that the educational dimension of systemic crises does not revolve around a lack of education as Western educational institutions understand it. The problem is just the opposite. What there has been too much of is people educated in the way that these institutions understand education, that is to say, as a specialist technical formation which guarantees that individuals can achieve their personal life goals. What is needed instead, he says, is the creation of an "educated public" that eschews utilitarian discourses and instrumental visions of education (Mueller, 2019).

### The responsibility of the university

A large proportion of the greatest disasters that have occurred in recent decades were caused by some of the most distinguished graduates from the world's most prestigious universities. How did this become possible? The answer is, above all, due to mistaken general education approaches, both at school and in undergraduate and graduate education, where certain individuals have been enabled to make transcendent and well-thought-out decisions without knowing what they were really doing. MacIntyre (2009b, p. 360) exemplifies this in the case of the 1997 collapse of the hedge fund Long-Term Capital Management, which was

the great forerunner of the financial crisis that would occur ten years later. The truth is that the confidence of those responsible for making decisions was reinforced by the presence on the board of Long-Term Capital Management of two Nobel-Prize-winning economists. Their confidence in the new mathematical models used was both blind and absolute. And, as far as economic theory and mathematics were concerned, no expert doubted that these people knew exactly what they were doing. However, what they lacked was knowledge of history and of political culture: knowledge of history, because they failed to take into account the vicissitudes that earlier companies had encountered when running high risks, and knowledge of political culture, because they did not take into account the peculiarities of one of the countries within which markets operate, Russia. They misinterpreted events there in the 1990s and failed to realize that Russian leaders were capable of changing – and, in fact, ended up changing – their economic policies in sudden, unforeseen ways.

The collapse of Long-Term Capital Management had something of the character of a farce, a comedy in which greedy experts fell victim to their own expertise, while the long global financial crisis that began a decade ago has some of the characteristics of a tragedy. This is a tale in which self-confident characters walked blindly over a cliff. In their hubris, they took all too many others with them. Highly educated, obedient cohorts of people with the most prestigious university degrees who trusted blindly in sophisticated mathematics whose applications they did not understand and who failed to realize that these roads had already been travelled many times before, with dramatic results. What they lacked was a broader curriculum in both undergraduate and graduate education that would have given them access to a vast body of knowledge in different fields, as well as enabling them to articulate, hierarchize, and integrate this knowledge. And that is precisely what contemporary universities neither offer nor even believe that they should offer (Stolz, 2017).

### Current trends and aspirations in the university

In one of his most important works, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*, MacIntyre (1990) described

the failure of enlightened morality due to its having moved away from the reality where the self finds its roots. The liberal university is responsible for conveying to thousands of people of different generations the message that neither an objective good nor a community in which we can find meaning for what we do exists. We must all blindly choose a meaning if we so desire – to each his own. In this way, the university fails to provide knowledge that is capable of imposing order on the infinite multiplicity of small, unaggregated elements of knowledge (Cross, 2014). The university student is at a fork in the road where there are no signposts. How can we guide their choice? The university then reappears to tell them that the only elegant way out is through specialization, which is aimed at achieving a place in society from which the student can obtain all the satisfactions they aspire to. From this perspective, the student is first and foremost a citizen who is a consumer and a spectator, necessary for the system to continue to function.

### The university: A mirror image of the postmodern world

A mirror image of the postmodern world, the university is one of the greatest producers of what Zygmunt Bauman called the liquid society and of which it is, in turn, the reflection. This reflection also existed in other periods of human history, such as Classical Greece. Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum reflected the spirit of a golden age for the development of philosophical genius. In contrast to them, Socrates's school represented the voice of a relativism more subtle than that of the Sophists, and the identification of politics with rhetoric. In *Whose Justice? Whose Rationality?* MacIntyre (1988) already hinted that the real predecessors of the modern liberal university were the followers of Socrates and not the Academics or the Peripatetics, because if the debate on good and evil cannot be resolved rationally, then only persuasion remains. Rhetorical capacity becomes the only useful philosophical instrument, and the path of investigation is reduced to advancement in the egotistical dominance of the universe.

Referring to another historical context, the time of the medieval universities, MacIntyre (1998) frequently stresses the revolutionary role played by St. Thomas Aquinas. Generally speaking, the plurality of schools that existed at the time (schools rooted in Latin Averroism, Augustinianism, Franciscanism, etc.) viewed Thomas as a threat and a danger because he questioned the overall approach to teaching, proposing instead a radically integrative new articulation. St. Thomas was not content with being allowed a place in which to discuss Aristotle. He was convinced of the need to rethink all content within a new synthesis. Accordingly, St. Thomas's points of disagreement with university approaches in the 13th century are the same as those that would lead him to oppose today's liberal university. Today, MacIntyre points out, American academic culture and its universities, for example, tend to present themselves as tolerantly welcoming of a host of heterogeneous views: positivism, pragmatism, Heideggerianism, deconstructivism, libertarianism, neo-Marxism, etc. St. Thomas, however, would not have accepted his own inclusion in this list. He was convinced that a *university* in which the curriculum was pure *diversity* without any form to provide unity and meaning to the whole was unacceptable.

### The difficulty of distinguishing what is specific to the university as such: The barbarism of specialization

Universities first appeared in the Middle Ages. Their vocation was both to serve the unity between teachers and students and to foster unity among the varying contents of knowledge. Following the Enlightenment and the establishment of the modern liberal state, these original intentions were adapted. Now, the university was organized as an instrument of cultural/national combat while also concentrating international research efforts and generating a multidisciplinary scientific community with a cosmopolitan mindset. This was a new form, then, and therefore a new way of understanding the *unity* assured by the university. This type of university, however, was unable to withstand the challenges of the 19th century, let alone those of the twentieth. In the 19th century, the values of the Enlightenment continued to serve as the basis for safeguarding a certain unity, a more or less unified idea of civilization and progress

and a certain notion of higher education in the likeness, to give an example, of the English gentleman. Nevertheless, certain clear-sighted thinkers and men of action such as John H. Newman warned of the essential incapacity encapsulated in the liberal approach, as it was prone to being carried away by relativism and skepticism. In an article entitled *The Very Idea of a University: Aristotle, Newman, and Us*, MacIntyre (2009b) insisted that disagreement over unified knowledge is the main reason why today's academic and university world considers Newman's concept of the university to be not only false, but totally irrelevant and meaningless.

The liberal university, having lost its capacity to provide a unique universal integrating framework, distanced itself from study by encouraging specialization. Although it still retained the misleading name of university, what has developed there is a series of studies that are increasingly specialized, in line with what José Ortega y Gasset called the "barbarism of specialization": the specialist or expert, according to the Spanish thinker, "knows" very well their tiny corner of the universe. However, they are radically ignorant of all the rest. The economists at Long-Term Capital Management are a good example of these true specialists.

### The compartmentalization of university life as a reflection of the multiple fracture of the postmodern individual

Another cause of this failure of the modern liberal university is the loss of an enlightened public or community. The demand for universal literacy and the role of schools as places of education aimed at the preservation of the established social order lies behind the practical disappearance of this enlightened public. The emergence of the mass media reinforced this loss and created an almost insurmountable breach between academia and the general public. We should not think, however, that the university is merely a victim of social and cultural changes. Rather, the barbarism of specialization is one of many symptoms of the internal fracture of the postmodern individual. Compartmentalization goes beyond the different institutional structures that characterize the social fabric to take shape around the practical belief that each sphere of life has its own rules of action, each independent of the other. The individual obeys

different codes of conduct according to the different roles he or she plays: one in family life, another at work, yet another during leisure time, and another as an army reservist, for example. But the individual has no any means of overcoming this type of multiple schizophrenia.

The scientific disciplines that constitute the subjects of study at university have multiplied since the 19ᵗʰ century. Moreover, within each discipline, the academic world encourages researchers to focus on an increasingly contracted subdiscipline. The methods that universities use to reward knowledge are based precisely on maintaining the academic status quo of specialization. We think, for example, of how doctoral theses are conceived in terms of the delimitation of their subject, or how the mechanisms for internal promotion within universities are organized.

An example of the university's inability to do more than mirror the factures of the postmodern individual is the case of Michel Foucault, as MacIntyre describes it in *Three Rival Versions*. In 1970, the French philosopher – known above all for his radical critique of social and academic conventions – accepted an invitation to give the inaugural lecture at the prestigious and traditional Collège de France. In his address, Foucault began by questioning the academic criteria used to lend validity to a textual commentary or other conventional means of academic expression, such as the very genre of the lecture. He considers these criteria an artificial mechanism for exercising domination and control over knowledge. In self-referential key, his lecture, therefore, is laid bare, stripped of the protecting mechanism that he himself criticizes. However, Foucault ends his lecture with the expected reference to one of his professors, Jean Hyppolite, and, moved, receives the applause of a rapt audience, delighted to have added another great *nom* to the list of lecturers at the Collège: "The radical has become a conserver, if not a conservative. Subversion has been subverted through its employment of the very academic mode which it aspired to undermine" (1990, p. 235).

In an article entitled *The End of Education: The Fragmentation of the American University*, MacIntyre (2006d) described the vicious circle of fragmentation within the university as a representative exponent of fragmentation in postmodern society. This vicious circle begins with the design of

specialized higher university studies that turn earlier studies into preparation, also with specialization in mind, and aimed precisely at enabling these higher studies. In their choice of electives, MacIntyre says, students at American universities tend not to stray from their chosen specialization because they are afraid of earning worse grades if they take subjects in which they may not fare so well at first. Teachers themselves also tend to give their students specialized training even if they believe these young people need a wider range of knowledge from other disciplines, and they end up supplying their charges with what they ask for, not what they need, for fear of being penalized in student evaluations and harming their own professional academic careers. The problem is that students then find themselves studying a series of subjects, each of which has a person responsible for organizing it internally but with no one responsible for making the connections between the parts. The students themselves are incapable of making those connections, assuming that such a thing is even possible.

### The need for action in the opposite direction to institutional inertia: In search of order

Besides criticizing the fragmentation of the university curriculum and noting how this and the broader fragmentation of society as a whole are interconnected, MacIntyre sketches out an alternative proposal for reforming university curricula and the way to understand the relationship between teachers, their teaching, and their research. More specifically, he considers that undergraduates should receive a general – but not superficial – education in three well-defined and interrelated disciplines. The first is mathematics and the physical and chemical sciences, so that they can understand recent discoveries about the brain. The second is knowledge of the history of ideas in their social, political, and economic context. The third is knowledge of two or three languages and their respective cultures. All three elements should have philosophical content to enable the student to think about the relationships between mind and body, the meaning of history, and the questions posed by our relationship to other cultures. The most astonishing element in MacIntyre's

proposal is his insistence that teachers (mathematicians, physicists, biologists, historians, language and literature teachers, anthropologists, and philosophers) should be dedicated not only to teaching their own discipline but also the curriculum as a whole, so that they themselves are able to formulate and pursue rival and alternative responses to an integrated curriculum such as the one the Scottish philosopher proposes, identifying the advantages and disadvantages of each.

MacIntyre is well aware of the resistance that a proposal like his would meet from the academic world. And he sees this resistance as an additional symptom of the complacency that affects university leadership, concerned only with maintaining the status quo. In answer to the objection that this type of integrated curriculum might endanger the adequate preparation of students for their inevitable future specialization, MacIntyre retorts by stating that it is precisely a unified understanding of knowledge and an idea of the order of things and knowledge of things that will best prepare them to develop their research skills most satisfactorily.

### The transition from secondary to higher education: The basic education of the pre-university student

The problems that MacIntyre finds in the education students receive before they enter university are, firstly, a lack of criteria about what it means to study at university, about the integration of the different parts of knowledge, etc., and secondly, the absence of a broad, coherent culture. The latter is due to the fact that, very often, the tendency towards specialization appears even in secondary education, with the result that secondary-school pupils consider useless and devoid of interest everything that is not directly related to the degree that they want to pursue in the future.

What MacIntyre finds lacking in the American university system, unlike its European counterpart, is a liberal and not superficial component in the education provided at high schools. He insists that, unless this system is restructured, it will be impossible to reconstruct the university system itself. What the Scottish philosopher demands is that a student beginning

a university degree should be provided with conceptual and logical tools that enable them to consider questions and answers to the proposals they receive at university and about everything they themselves are doing. However, this approach would require, from the outset, a radical change in our understanding of the purposes of human action in general and of intellectual activity in particular. The market-based, utilitarian mindset that has become predominant in academia would have to be completely eliminated. Secondary-school students today – and this is something that goes back for many generations – see the university as a lever to obtaining a good job. The universities themselves encourage this mindset in their marketing strategies. Even the political world often requires the university world to adapt its functioning to the changing needs of society, as if the function of the university were primarily to supply individuals who are both technically well-educated and docile enough to occupy the posts assigned to them. But this would imply negating the main purpose of the university, which is none other than to constitute the scene where an enlightened public can find well-formulated and appropriate questions about the hierarchy of knowledge and the relationship between knowledge, technique, and human development, and where rational and coherent answers to such questions can be sought.

### The challenges to the Catholic university in the 21st century

The fragmentation of knowledge in today's universities occurs in exactly the same way at secular universities as at religious universities, whether Catholic or Protestant. Historically speaking, we could point to the secularizing tendency of leaders of religious institutions to adopt the mechanisms of modern liberal institutions as a cause of this situation. In fact, however, the status of theology in the academic world is simply that of one more discipline among many.

In his book *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition*, MacIntyre (2009a) returns to the problem of the fragmentation of knowledge and introduces the need to recover its

unity through an architecture whose cornerstone is theology, no matter whether this is Catholic or Protestant theology. Even dialectical materialism supplied Soviet universities with a vehicle for the integration of knowledge that gave meaning to all research at them, even if this was in the wrong direction, precisely because it was based on false premises. The problem with Western universities, and the Western world in general, is their renouncement of a unitary view of reality and the subsequent move to take refuge in specialization and fragmentation. At the old Soviet university, atheism was not merely a particular theological position, but a practical position that gave a certain order to all secular knowledge. In the modern Western university, atheism slips in through the back door in the form of simple ignorance of God, of whom there is only circumstantial evidence as a part of studies of the history of religions or some similar discipline. That is why MacIntyre believes that Catholic universities have a special responsibility to change this situation (Rist, 2013).

### Institutional renewal: Leading the change in direction

Only a complete restructuring of the university and pre-university curriculum can resolve the problem of the fragmentation of knowledge. From the Catholic perspective, the advantage lies in its confidence in the capacity of reason to ask the correct, decisive questions about what we should study and in what sense. When MacIntyre wrote *Three Rival Versions*, he chose Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* as a model of the Catholic tradition. The encyclical proposes St. Thomas Aquinas as an infallible guide for the organization and method of higher studies. A century later, John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et ratio* contained a fierce defense of the capacity of human reason to determine the truth of things. MacIntyre is convinced that only a university capable of philosophically questioning the organization of knowledge and how to attain it will be able to find the unity that can begin to correct the global fragmentation of society. However, the Scottish thinker does not deny that a university can exist without the support of Catholic theology, but with a philosophical vision that is open enough to give unity to knowledge. The problem is that this has become almost impossible in practice and would in

any case be a project that would be enormously difficult to sustain over time. Nor does MacIntyre propose that we restore the university from the 13th century as St. Thomas conceived it – and which was different, as we have noted, from the university he actually experienced – in the 21st century. MacIntyre is well aware that what he proposes may seem absurd and unfeasible. Indeed, it seems absurd, yet it is absolutely indispensable if we are to successful resolve the current challenges. This is a project suggested to us by the Catholic philosophical tradition itself. Research into particular sciences cannot be isolated from philosophical inquiry, and philosophy is forged through the relationship with theology and other disciplines. All of this requires the presence of the university (MacIntyre, 2009a, p. 179). The truth is, however, that the type of university in which to develop this project may not be the type that is common today, and which MacIntyre calls "the research university," that is to say, one where specialization is sacred and the idea of the university as a search for unified knowledge is unthinkable (Hutter, 2009). However, this concept of the university has become so powerfully institutionalized that the main obstacle we would encounter would be the very idea that teaching and research staff have of themselves.

### The renewal of teachers: The need to turn back

In his article *Catholic Universities: Dangers, Hopes, Choices*, MacIntyre (2001) offers a provocative analysis of what a fragmented and fragmenting research university is. He believes that the touchstone for determining whether a university is entering into such a dynamic is to inquire into its system for promoting teaching staff – for example, whether a university has no problems promoting a teacher who is unable or unwilling to give classes to undergraduates and, at most, teaches doctorate courses while boasting a wide range of publications, exclusively in his/her area of specialization, etc. And if this same university finds it impossible to promote a teacher who works well with beginners or even pre-university students, not only because they are able to transmit their discipline, but because they are able to show their pupils how that discipline is integrated into knowledge as a whole and reality in general, although he/she

has published only a few articles and a few excellent thoughts on teaching, then such a university is actively contributing to fragmentation and disorder.

Another factor that reinforces fragmentation is the bureaucratic system of university assessment. Despite the differences between different legislative frameworks, the general tendency is to create a new intellectual caste that establishes academic procedures which everyone must follow, with the result that the contents of research are only considered appropriate if they further an approach based on continuous specialization. Consequently, for example, the author of several philosophical articles will be assessed by a bureaucrat who may never have read Aristotle. Sometimes assessments are conducted according to rankings of publications that are often self-referential. How can someone who advocates the need for radical change in approaches to higher research be assessed appropriately? Where will they publish their article? The obvious consequence of all this is that the academic world has become a powerfully established field in which any attempt at transformation clashes with self-protective procedures that oblige novice teachers to choose between adapting to these mechanisms or changing their profession (Murphy, 2013). Institutions are similarly forced to accept the rules of the academic game with the result that, more or less consciously, they also direct their teachers and researchers towards approaches that increase fragmentation.

Only a radical reform of views on the teacher and the researcher's mission can reverse this dynamic (Torre, 2020). Such a reform, however, would require us to emerge from the system without losing touch with scientific development in the different disciplines, as suggested earlier. It would require, first and foremost, the provision of a solid philosophical education to members of the university institution, not only the teachers, but also the leaders. This would enable the university to introduce the curriculum that MacIntyre proposes, one in which the sciences, the history of ideas and society, and knowledge of languages and cultures are formally unified through their connection with philosophy and theology. From this perspective, we can conceive of the university as a therapeutic

community (Smith, 2003), since it defends us against the danger of fragmentation and invites us to think together.

### The indispensable philosophical and theological formality of curricula at Catholic universities

MacIntyre's diagnosis of the university's situation in today's world also extends to Catholic universities. According to the Scottish philosopher, the fact that these include theology and philosophy as specializations without consequence for the overall ordering of studies means that the same trends towards fragmentation and market-based study are repeated there. Another common error among Catholic universities is to believe that the difference between them and secular universities should consist in the fact that they stage religious ceremonies on solemn occasions or organize prayer groups as complementary activities during the academic year. What these minimalist approaches achieve is a betrayal of what the *magisterium* itself teaches, especially in the Apostolic Constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. That document, MacIntyre reminds us, establishes that university studies should always strive to determine the place that corresponds to each of the scientific disciplines and the meaning they have within the framework of a particular view of mankind and the world. This particular vision, in the case of Catholic universities, should lead them to teach Catholic philosophy and theology, without which the appropriate formality that gives unity to studies would be wholly lacking. Secular universities, if they wish to be anything more than a simple hodgepodge of disconnected disciplines, should find their own formality, perhaps by revising the liberal tradition itself, although this would become clearly problematic given that, in reality, the fragmentation they suffer is caused by the liberal tradition itself. Protestant universities, where in theory one could also find a frame of reference and a vehicle for formal unity in their own theological vision, present a different case.

The mission of philosophy and theology in supplying an order of knowledge to the work and contents of the academic field goes beyond university life itself. The mission transcends the university world in seeking to offer society criteria to adopt in order to ask the right questions

about the meaning of human activity. In this sense, MacIntyre finds complete agreement between *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* and the encyclical *Fides et Ratio* when, in his comment on the latter, he wrote:

> We have within our social order few, if any milieus within which reflective and critical enquiry concerning the central issues of human life can be sustained and the education to which we subject our young is not well-designed to develop the habits of thought necessary for such questioning … When plain persons do try ask those questions about the human good and the nature of things in which the philosophical enterprise is rooted, the culture immediately invites them to think about something else and to forget those questions. (MacIntyre, 2006a, p. 182)

It is also true that the Church's authority promises that certain answers will be found, though this does not prevent (on the contrary) the continuation of philosophical activity: "Philosophical questioning, when it encounters the mystery of God's self-revelation, does not come to an end, but is entrusted with new and additional tasks, for which it is provided with new and enriched resources" (MacIntyre, 2006a, p. 182).

## Conclusion

Faced by the great health, economic, and even cultural crisis we are currently immersed in, it might seem superfluous to ponder a philosopher's analysis of the situation of the universities and their role in the world – even more so when it comes to a thinker like Alasdair MacIntyre, who focuses on seemingly more practical issues which, therefore, affect everyone and not just that rather small section of society that is directly involved in academia. However, the truth is that the Scottish philosopher published numerous reflections on the subject of the university in the first decade of the 21st century, and that these pieces are fully in line with the rest of his works, even functioning as a necessary conclusion to the application of what is usually known as the *After Virtue* project.

The situation of the university today is an unequivocal sign of where society is heading. Conversely, a radical reform of the university is essential in order to provide society with the tools necessary to overcome the challenges that the 21st century has revealed, challenges that are the result of shortcomings and failings in previous centuries. Only a university with a philosophy capable of structuring the order of humanist, scientific, and technical knowledge, assigning to each a place from which the whole makes it possible to ascertain a global significance, will be able to make this an institution that orders social life through the authority recognized by a community sufficiently endowed with the essential cultural elements. The university must once again become a seat of knowledge recognized as such by the many. That is what *auctoritas* means, in the sense of knowledge recognized by many, a multitude that is a sufficiently educated people.

An academic cannot ignore his or her cultural, social, and political vocation. In his book on Edith Stein, MacIntyre (2006c) compared the Jewish German philosopher's trajectory to that of one of the most important 20th-century thinkers, Martin Heidegger. While Stein integrated her philosophical research into her very life, even accepting great sacrifices, Heidegger separated his activity as a philosopher from his political engagement and in this way made it impossible for the university to become a place for critical reflection and a guide for social culture.

A wisdom-based university must be capable of putting its own home in order before serving as a guide to society. Putting its home in order entails radically rethinking both curricula and the articulation between pre-university and university teaching, as well as the academic career as a whole. This is not an easy task, and may even be completely unfeasible, and there is no way that it can be successfully achieved if, through inertia, an institutional policy is maintained which insists that the modern university project is still alive when all that remains of it is its ghost, albeit a ghost that accommodates an academic oligarchy more concerned with maintaining the status quo than with rediscovering and reinventing the university.

The present and future of higher education in the 21st century invites us to endorse the old adage *sapientis est ordinare*, enabling the university to become an institution that enlightens and is a source of order for social life.

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